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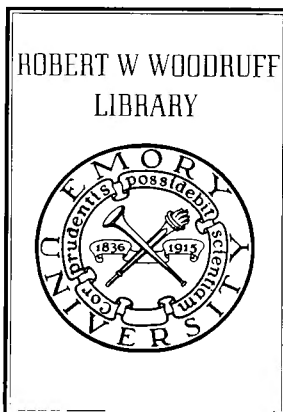
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# ONE FAULT

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# ONE FAULT.

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## CHAPTER I.

THE persons of the story I am about to tell were neither of high rank, nor of distinguished fashion ; and, worse still, the narrative cannot by possibility be forced to become one of romantic interest. Ordinary every-day human beings, and ordinary every-day events are my theme. I deem it fair to premise thus much, lest any persons looking for more exciting subjects may be cheated into reading my volumes, and then turn angry and disappointed away.

And how shall I introduce these ordinary personages to the reader with the least chance of wearying him at the very first step of our journey together? The names of Mr. this, Mrs. that, and Miss t'other, can awaken little interest in the recital ; yet I have no other *dramatis personæ* to arouse attention or challenge respect. That they shall be such men and women as I have seen and known, is the only fact concerning them that can be urged as an apology for introducing them at all, and this, such as it is, must sustain my courage ; while I venture without further preface to enumerate, in a sort of *catalogue raisonné*, the individuals whose adventures I am about to recount.

In one of the richest valleys of Somersetshire, where hedgerows green, abounding herbage, and unshorn elm-trees, make every separate field look like a separate paradise, nestles the white-washed village of Abbot's Preston. Its clergyman, the kind-hearted Henry Worthington, shall stand at the head of my list ; but I will not pause to tell how good he was, or how beloved ; all that will speak for itself in the sequel ; but I will describe his dwelling, because, as I have known parsonage-houses vary from mansions which could not be adequately supported under five thousand a year to low-roofed sheds of much less apparent dignity than their patron's cow-house, it may materially assist in giving a correct idea of the family picture.

In truth, the parsonage of Preston must have been a pretty residence in any hands, and in those of Mr. Worthington it was beautiful. Though large enough to be a commodious dwelling

for a numerous family, it was a cottage in aspect, the roof thatched, and the windows opening in the fashion of casements, though their leaded lozenge-shaped panes had been exchanged for others giving a fairer proportion of light.

The garden was large enough to permit the banishing of peas, beans, lettuce, and cabbage from the eyes polite looking forth from drawing and dining rooms; and its lawn and shrubberies, its vistas letting in the light, and lofty tower richly pinnacled, of that beautiful stone, the jewel of the district, whose soft grey tints harmonize so well with earth and heaven,—all this, together with its flowers blooming in gay succession, from the first universal burst of lilac to the latest setting glory of the choicest dahlias, and its sequestered root-house, and its enticing chairs beneath the shelter of perfumed acacias, might, altogether, in a comparison of beauty, have borne away the prize from many a domain of ten times its revenue, and fifty times its size. Such was the parsonage of Abbot's Preston; and, having given this necessary sketch, we must now return to the catalogue of those connected with it. Mrs. Worthington, a help meet in every way for its owner, was a woman of good birth, with a fortune of five thousand pounds, and distinguished, at the time she married him, for a very uncommon degree of personal beauty. A baronet uncle and his lady were equally perplexed and displeased by the pertinacity with which the young beauty persisted in her determination of becoming a poor country clergyman's wife, when it was clearly evident to all the world, that she might have become the bride of a much richer man, had she chosen it. One reason for this pertinacity, perhaps, was, that the rich man was quite old enough to be her father; and, in fact, he soon gave the the angry baronet reason to believe, that in the sentiment he had conceived for his beautiful niece, there must have been some mixture of paternal feeling; for no sooner was it known that Margaret Clark was married to Mr. Worthington, than he presented him to the living of Abbot's Preston, which opportunely became vacant a short time after that event.

This Margaret Clark, now Mrs. Worthington, was the youngest of three sisters, the eldest being ten years her senior, and very nearly as remarkable for the want of personal attractions, as Mrs. Worthington for the possession of them; but to atone for this, she had the reputation of being one of the cleverest young women of the age. The second sister, Lucy, was neither so handsome as Margaret, nor so clever as the philosophical Christina; but, nevertheless, she had found the way to captivate the affections of a young military man who gave fair promise of becoming as distinguished as he was amiable; but he was among the lamented brave who fell at Waterloo, and



poor Lucy from that hour seemed to sink into the quiet retreat of old-maidism, and to welcome it as a Roman Catholic damsel might the veil, after a disappointment of the same kind. These two ladies, who had neither father, mother, nor brother to influence their residence, settled themselves in a small, but comfortable dwelling, at the distance of two short miles from the parsonage of Abbot's Preston, and continued to live there, on the income of their little fortunes, with much tranquillity, and some enjoyment.

Another individual whom the preferment of Mr. Worthington to the living of Abbot's Preston brought to that quiet retreat, was his uncle, Colonel Seaton; he had, indeed, become a member of his nephew's family from within a few months after his marriage, and had never left them since. Uncle David, as the venerable man was called, not only throughout the family, but very nearly throughout the parish also, had passed the limit of three-score and ten when my story begins; but though old and poor, for he had no worldly wealth beyond his lieutenant-colonel's half-pay, he was a personage of considerable importance in the family, for there was not a single heart that did not love him.

Next in rehearsal must follow the two fair daughters, and the hopeful son of my village pastor. But, methinks this catalogue is already long enough, and therefore I shall let the rest of my people introduce themselves in the order in which my narrative may bring them forward.

On a fine evening in July, 1832, the whole of the parsonage family, with Alfred Reynolds, a Winchester friend of Charles Worthington's, to boot, were luxuriating in the shade of a walnut-tree upon the lawn. A table with wine and fruit was in the midst of them; and though they had done with it, they still kept possession of the spot, too comfortable or too lazy to remove.

The group formed a pretty picture. Margaret, the eldest of the two girls, a sweet-looking fair creature of twenty, was playing chess at one corner of the table with her young brother Charles, a lad of seventeen with an eye like a hawk, hair black as the raven's wing, merry, mischievous, and with a restless activity of spirit that made him the amusement and the terror of the whole house. Mr. Worthington was reading a newspaper, and, to say the truth, more than half asleep; his wife appeared assiduously knitting, but chatted to them all in turn, while beside the knee of uncle David, on a low stool, sat one of the very prettiest creatures that nature ever formed. Isabella Worthington had just passed her eighteenth birthday, and within the last year had shot up into most lovely womanhood. Without being like either brother or sister, she had something

of each. The large dark eyes of Charles, and his raven hair, were rendered a thousand times more striking by a complexion as delicately beautiful, though with more of the lily, and less of the rose than that of her sister. And in character as in person she, in a remarkable degree, united the qualities which distinguished the other two; for amidst a buoyant, playful gaiety that almost equalled that of her brother, the tender softness of Margaret's temper often showed itself.

Of a family attached throughout to each other with very strong affection, this lovely happy creature was the universal and acknowledged darling, and confessed by all to be their chief pride, treasure, and delight.

Very near the group formed by uncle David and Isabella, was another, composed of the young stranger lad Alfred Reynolds, and Neptune, the Newfoundland house-dog, which might have sat as the model of that celebrated "member of the Humane Society" lately the glory of Trafalgar-square. They were engaged in a desperate game of romps, so desperate indeed, that Isabella thought it necessary to guard uncle David's head by raising one of her little hands between him and the vehement playfellows.

"Which of us two is your hand intended to terrify and keep in order, Miss Isabella?" said the youth laughing. "Do you know," he continued, "I don't think we should be either of us much afraid of it, even if it were to make an attack instead of standing on the defensive."

"Well, then, as you are great, be merciful," replied Isabella, "and draw off your forces beyond the reach of doing us mischief. I do assure you when Neptune makes a descent after one of those prodigious bounds, the receiving him would by no means be agreeable to uncle David."

"He shall not hurt either of you," said the boy with a smile, and such a smile as no one could see without feeling quite sure that no harm could befall them from him. "Sit down, sir! Down, Neptune!" and seating himself on the turf close to Isabella and her uncle, Alfred coaxed the huge dog to crouch down beside him, with his shaggy head nestled under his arm.

There was something in this arrangement that seemed to shed a brighter beam of happiness than usual over the countenance of the young Reynolds; for his blue eye, as it settled on the face of Isabella, was radiant with youth and joy. Unfortunately for Alfred, he was a whole month younger than Isabella; a misfortune which he inwardly mourned as much as his happy spirit seemed at that time capable of mourning anything. But though he felt sensibly the disparity of their ages, and, to say the truth, she was rather taller than himself, not all his reason-

ing upon the subject could prevent his falling in love with her ; and in love he was, over head and ears, but with no more intention of hinting the circumstance to the young lady herself, than of requesting the Emperor of Russia to let him be czar in his stead. Yet he nevertheless sometimes fancied how she would look, how she would laugh, how she would frown, how she would scorn him. Poor Alfred ! He really was unfortunate ; for with one of the very handsomest faces in the world, with glancing eyes of bonny blue that seemed made to laugh away a female heart ; and clustering curls that when the sun shone on them appeared to catch and hold captive his rays in a mesh of gold ; with teeth of ivory, and nose of comely mould, half-way between Greek and Roman ;—with all this, and a thousand good gifts beside, he was so short, that though eighteen, he looked at least three years younger. Poor fellow ! How he envied the greyhound growth of his friend Charles, who though so much his junior, could very nearly look over his head ! However, notwithstanding this misery, the holidays, which were already half over, had not passed thus far without affording him some hours of very particular happiness. Some of them were spent in fishing with his friend Charles, some in scampering on borrowed ponies, with the same gay companion, over hill and over dale ; some in reading in the very deepest shade he could find, Shakspeare, Spenser, Scott, and Byron, whose works, happily for him, were found amidst the furniture of the parsonage ; some in playing with Neptune ; and other some in sitting and gazing as he did now on the dangerous wonders of Isabella's face. It was chiefly at night, particularly when the moon shone, that his love came upon him in the shape of sorrow, and then he was wont to relieve himself by pouring forth on paper, without restraint, his rhymed sufferings,—and a great relief it was.

Nothing of all this, however, was suspected by anybody, and Isabella therefore scrupled not to talk to him, and listen to him, and walk with him, and accept his nosegays exactly as she would have done had he been five years younger. So now when he asked her to pat Neptune, she patted him ; and when he said to her in a half-whisper, " You do not love the dog, Miss Isabella, one half so well as the dog loves you," she laughed, and looked down at his speaking blue eyes as they looked up at her, without understanding a single syllable they said.

It was just at this moment, when Isabella was thinking to herself (but in a style of indifference that the young lover would not at all have approved), " What a very handsome boy Alfred Reynolds is !" that the ear of Charles caught the sound of a horse's feet in the lane that skirted the bottom of the lawn.

He left his game of chess, and took a hop, step, and jump to see who it might be; for the lane led only to their house, and the sound therefore seemed to announce a visitor; but he returned in a minute and reseated himself, saying, "It is only a servant."

"Whose servant, Charles?" said Mr. Worthington, looking up.

"I don't know, father," replied the boy. "He is dressed like a groom, and I did not see his colours; but he rode a black horse like one of Mr. Wentworth's."

"It is not very likely to be Mr. Wentworth's groom coming here," said Mrs. Worthington; "your father dined with him a fortnight ago, and will, I suppose, according to custom, dine with him again about five months and a fortnight hence; but though his invitations are somewhat ceremonious, I don't suppose he will make them quite *de si longue main* as that. By the way," continued Mrs. Worthington, "I have a great notion that after all he means to lay himself and his ten thousand a year at the feet of Lady Louisa Pope."

"I cannot imagine what makes you fancy that, mamma," said Isabella rather eagerly; "I did not see anything at the races, either on the course or in the ball-room, at all like particular attention to Lady Louisa."

"Did you not, dearest? Then I suspect you were thinking of something else. What say you, Margaret?"

"No, indeed, mamma," replied her eldest daughter, who had suffered herself to be checkmated while listening to the discussion, "I certainly saw nothing of the kind; and if I were to tell you frankly what I do think about Mr. Wentworth, I suspect you would laugh at me, and declare perhaps that I saw what was not yet in sight."

"And pray what might that be?" asked the mother, appearing very earnestly intent upon taking up a stitch in her knitting.

"I saw, or thought I saw," replied Margaret, looking furtively at Isabella, "not only on the course and at the race ball, but at the archery meeting too, that Mr. Wentworth admired Isabella much more than he did anybody else."

"Who are they talking of, my dear?" said uncle David laying his hand on the shoulder of Isabella.

"I don't very well know, uncle David," replied Isabella with a bright blush, "they are talking nothing but nonsense."

"I'll tell you who they are talking about, uncle David," cried Charles, nearly springing over the head of Margaret, and placing himself in front of the old man; "they are talking about the richest, and the grandest, and the handsomest man in Somersetshire, and that you know is Mr. Wentworth."

Alfred Reynolds looked for an instant in the face of Isabella; then sprang on his feet, and whistling Neptune to follow him, dived into a shrubbery walk that led into the fields.

"And what are they saying about Mr. Wentworth, my dear?" inquired Colonel Seaton.

"Shall I tell, Isabella?" said the laughing boy sitting down on the turf in the place that Alfred had vacated: "shall I tell uncle David what Margaret has been saying?"

"Do, mamma, tell Charles not to talk so very much nonsense," said Isabella rising. "At any rate I need not stay to listen to him;" and away she ran, escaping into the shelter of the drawing-room through its open window.

The conversation, however, continued, and rather in a more serious tone, for uncle David, gently pushing aside the head of the saucy Charles, who was longing to be questioned, gravely said to his mother—

"Do they mean that Mr. Wentworth of Oak Park is in love with Isabella?"

"They are silly children, uncle David, and probably mean nothing," replied Mrs. Worthington. "Shall I give you another glass of wine, sir?"

"No, no more wine, niece," replied the old man, adding a moment after, "I don't want Mr. Wentworth to be in love with Isabella."

"No?—and why not, uncle David?" said Mr. Worthington, laughing; "I declare I should like it very much."

"And so should I," exclaimed Charles eagerly. "Wouldn't I gallop his beautiful horses about! Oh, I should so like it!"

"I should not be the least bit surprised if he offered to her," said Margaret with an air that seemed to say she knew something about it.

"Indeed, and what do you say, Madge?" said Mr. Worthington to his wife.

"Why, my dear," replied the mother, appearing very little moved by Margaret's announcement, "the fact is, that Isabella has been very much noticed and admired wherever I have taken her this year, but I really have no particular reason for thinking that Mr. Wentworth admires her more than other people."

"I don't want Mr. Wentworth to admire her," murmured Colonel Seaton; "he does not look joyous enough for Isabella."

"Oh, but he is so handsome and elegant," cried Margaret.

"I must confess I see nothing to object to in his appearance," observed Mrs. Worthington; "I cannot think, sir, what you see amiss in his countenance. He is undoubtedly very handsome."

"And he has ten thousand a year, uncle David," added the father gaily, "so when he proposes we must think at least twice



before we refuse him on account of his gravity. But as yet I believe we need not make up our minds upon the subject; it does not seem to me quite certain that Squire Wentworth, his houses and lands, will be laid at the feet of our Isabella. Whose servant is that, Margaret?"

This question was occasioned by a near glimpse of the horseman, who had been before reconnoitred at a distance. Charles jumped upon a chair, and was then able to obtain a full view of the object of inquiry.

"It's Mr. Wentworth's groom, as I live!" exclaimed the boy clapping his hands. "Margaret is right, mother, and here comes an offer of the park, and the pinery, the hunters, dogs, gamekeepers, and all!"

"Do hold your tongue, Charles," said Mrs. Worthington colouring; "I am sure you may be heard in the lane. What can Mr. Wentworth's groom be coming here for, I wonder?"

"Something about the turnpike meeting, I dare say," said Mr. Worthington, resuming his newspaper.

"Oh, very likely," replied his wife, though as she spoke she fixed her eyes in the direction from which whatever message had to reach them must come, with singular interest, considering how very little ladies in general care about turnpike meetings. Her suspense was not of long duration, for with as little delay as possible a servant walked through the dining-room window to the lawn, and presented a letter to Mr. Worthington.

"Any answer, sir?" said the man, perceiving that his master had perused the few lines contained in the despatch.

"Yes, I must write," was the reply; and Mr. Worthington rose, and entered the house.

It would be difficult to find anywhere a better behaved wife than Mrs. Worthington, and the idea of pursuing her husband into his library to see what he might be going to write, would, under all ordinary circumstances, have appeared to her an exceedingly improper interference with his affairs; but upon this occasion she felt incapable of resisting the curiosity which urged her to follow him; and when he seated himself at his desk, she was at his side.

"Forgive me, dearest Henry," she said, "I do not often pester you thus when you are busy, but do have pity on my impatience, and tell me what Mr. Wentworth's letter contains?"

"Nothing to repay you, dear wife, for the trouble of asking," and so saying he put the note into her hands. It contained only these words:—

"Mr. Wentworth presents his compliments to Mr. Worthington, and will be much obliged by his appointing any hour

to-morrow at which he would be at leisure to receive a call from him."

This was very short, and not very satisfactory; nevertheless, it sufficed to keep Mrs. Worthington in a state of considerable restlessness during the time her husband was employed in replying to it.

"And what have you said to him?" she eagerly inquired, on perceiving that he had concluded his despatch.

"I have told him, Madge, that I shall be happy to see him at any time between two and five," replied her husband, smiling at the earnestness of her tone.

"Dearest Henry!" exclaimed the lady with some vexation, "why did you not name some hour before luncheon?"

"Because it was more convenient to me to fix the time after it, my dear. But what is it you have got into your head, Margaret? How comes it that this visit appears to interest you so greatly?"

"I should have no objection in the world to tell you," she replied, "only I feel sure that you will think me ridiculous."

"Don't let that stop you, Madge," said her husband, laughing, "for whether you speak or not, I cannot but guess the stuff that is in your thoughts."

"Do you guess? But do not keep the servant."

She rang the bell, and the letter was despatched.

"And so, Henry, you think you already know as much as I could tell you?" she resumed.

"It would be presumption to say that," he replied; "but I know you think that Wentworth is coming here to-morrow to propose for Isabella."

"Yes, I do. But I could tell you more, if you would listen to me."

"I will listen to you," said her husband; "but be not disappointed if, after you have told me all you know, and all you fancy, I should still persist in doubting the probability that the best match in the county should be obtained by a portionless girl, with nothing to recommend her but her large black eyes, and her little white hands."

"Nothing to recommend her? O Henry!"

"Dear soul! Do you fancy that everybody will see her with our eyes? How can anybody see her as we do, Margaret? How should Wentworth, for instance, who has danced with her, and talked to her perhaps half a dozen times, for as many half hours—how should he know what she is?"

"Most assuredly he cannot; nor is there any necessity that he should perceive that she is not only the loveliest, but the best and brightest jewel of the county."

"That is a very mamma-like speech, Margaret. But, in truth, Isabella is a very pretty girl; enough so, perhaps, to excuse about five-eighths of the admiration we bestow upon her. Nevertheless, my dear, I still doubt the probability of Mr. Wentworth's coming to the conclusion that she would be a suitable match for him."

"You have no faith, then, in my powers of observation, and think nothing of my having watched him during the last three or four times they have met; in short, at nearly every party since Isabella has been out?"

"What is it you have seen?"

"I have seen him remain with his eyes fixed upon her for minutes together."

"Oh! that is nothing, Madge. Uncle David does just the same; and so does that young rogue, Alfred Reynolds. Everybody likes to look at Isabella."

"Nonsense, Henry! But I will say no more. To-morrow will show if I am right or wrong."

"And as to-morrow, even after luncheon," replied her husband, again venturing to laugh a little, "is not very distant, we shall, I hope, be able to make our patience hold out; yet there is one question I should like to ask you, Margaret, before we dismiss the subject. Do you think Isabella is in love with this young man?"

"In love! Isabella in love with him! How can you ask such a question, Mr. Worthington? As if it were likely Isabella should be in love with a man who has never yet said a word to her on the subject!"

"You mean that you think she is not in love with him?"

"To be sure she is not in love with him."

"I am glad of that, Madge, at any rate."

Here Charles entered to say that uncle David thought he had sat out long enough, and Mr. Worthington hurried away to give him his arm, as assiduously as if a large legacy depended upon it; so the discussion on Mr. Wentworth and Isabella was cut short.

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## CHAPTER II.

Mrs. WORTHINGTON was not at all a silly woman, notwithstanding the overweening maternity which may, perhaps, be attributed to her on a perusal of the last chapter, and she gave proof of this, by not letting Isabella receive the slightest hint of all her incessant ruminations on the subject of Mr. Wentworth's

visit. Charles plagued his sister a little upon the possibilities which the embassy had suggested, but the wiser Margaret said not a word more on the subject; and, as soon as the luncheon of the following day was ended, Mrs. Worthington desired her daughters to walk over the fields, and pay a visit to their aunts at Appleton, where she knew they would be detained long enough to avoid the danger of any ill-timed interview with the expected visitor.

At half past-two precisely, Mr. Wentworth and his groom were seen approaching by the embowered lane. Mrs. Worthington's heart gave a leap; and, without saying a word to anybody, she mounted to her own room, and shut herself in.

The interview took place in the rector's little study, and lasted about twenty minutes; after which, Mrs. Worthington heard the study-door open, and the voice of her husband speaking, as she thought, more gravely than usual, as he accompanied his guest into the hall. A small dressing-room, situated over the porch, opened from her room; and the mother could not resist the temptation of placing herself in a sort of ambush, for the purpose of looking out and seeing him depart. The groom was leading two beautiful horses round the little drive; and the next moment she saw Mr. Wentworth spring lightly into his saddle, stoop from it to say a parting word, shake hands very cordially with Mr. Worthington, and then gallop off, giving her an excellent opportunity of admiring his graceful person, his perfect horsemanship, and the excellent style of his horses and their groom; but she had caught no glimpse of his countenance. She saw that Mr. Worthington stood looking after him for a moment before he re-entered the house; and, during this moment, she determined not to go down to him immediately, so greatly did she fear both the possible disappointment, and the merciless quizzing of her husband, when he told her of it. No! she would not go down; she would employ herself in looking at some of Isabella's sketches that she had not admired above a hundred times before: but ere she had well placed herself at the table which held the portfolio, the footstep of Mr. Worthington was distinctly audible upon the stairs.

"Then, I suppose, I have been mistaken, and he is coming to tell me so," she said aloud, in direct contradiction to the secret belief that sent the blood into her cheeks. The next moment the door opened, and her husband stood before her. She raised her eyes to his face, but she asked no question; neither did he speak till he had drawn a chair to her little table, and placed himself by her. But the rapid glance of a woman and a mother had left her little to learn. She knew perfectly well, before

he opened his lips, that Mr. Wentworth had proposed for Isabella.

"Well, Margaret," said Mr. Worthington, taking her hand. "I must always believe you in future, I suppose, when you tell me that gentlemen are in love with my daughters; but, to be sure, it is a most unexpected event."

"He has proposed, then, for our girl, Henry?" said the mother, bursting into tears; "O my dear, dear Isabella! How shall I ever bear to part with her?"

"Pretty creature!" replied the father, while tears started to his eyes, too. "The house will, indeed, seem dead without her. But it is an immense match, Margaret, and he is most nobly liberal in his proposals about settlements."

"I do not doubt it. It is quite what I should have expected from him; and though I weep so foolishly, you must not fancy I am ungrateful, or that I do not rejoice at such great good fortune. Dear, dear Isabella! I think she *must* be happy; and what a connection for Charles! and what an immense advantage to Margaret!"

"And you think she likes him, wife?"

"Oh, yes! I am quite sure of it. I am quite sure she likes him better than any one she has ever seen, and quite as much as any girl ought to like a man before he has proposed for her."

"Where is the dear creature?" demanded Mr. Worthington. "All Mr. Wentworth asked of me was permission to address her; so matters are not very far advanced as yet; and if Isabella is not quite sure she loves him, he shall not have her, Margaret: nothing on earth shall induce me to utter a single word approaching to persuasion. Pretty playful Isabella! O Margaret! at the very best it is an awful change for her, from bounding over our flowery uplands like a fawn, and being the idol of a whole household of loving hearts, to sitting in state in a great drawing-room hung with crimson satin and being the lady instead of the darling of all around her; but if she does not herself wish for this change earnestly, ardently, I will never consent to it; no, not though he should offer to endow her with every acre that belongs to him."

"You seem to forget, Henry, how remarkably handsome and agreeable Mr. Wentworth is. Nobody will be able to accuse our Isabella of marrying for money only. Mr. Wentworth is a man who, if he had but as many hundreds to spend as he has thousands, would find no difficulty in winning any girl whose heart was previously free. He is a delightful person every way; and were he not I should be the first to decline his offers for our incomparable girl, let them be as magnificent as they would."



"I know it, dear wife, I know it; and I know, besides, that if Isabella does not love him, it is as much in her power to refuse Mr. Wentworth as anybody else; so there is no need to sigh about it; the proposal is a magnificent one, and very flattering to us all. But where is she? He has asked leave to call here this evening; and I have promised that, if Isabella makes no objection, you will give him some tea; but I have promised, also, that if she does, I will let him know it in time to prevent his making his appearance. Where is she?"

"She is gone with Margaret to call on my sisters," replied Mrs. Worthington; "I thought it was best she should be out of the way when the visit was made this morning."

"Quite right, certainly; but I wish she were at home now; you cannot think how this suspense worries me, Margaret."

"Then I am very sorry I sent her; and, Heaven knows, I am not much at ease myself; but I do not think they will stay long."

"How do you know that, my dear? I should not be at all surprised if they stayed to dine with their aunts; it is what they have often done before."

"Heaven forbid!" fervently exclaimed Mrs. Worthington; "what on earth should we do if Mr. Wentworth came before she returned?"

"That must not be permitted, most certainly. The best way will be for me to drive over in the car immediately, and bring them back with me."

"But let me tell her of it, Henry; it is a mother's office."

Her husband smiled. "Will you go with me, my dear, to see that I keep counsel? The high-roads and hedges are not the proper witnesses of such a disclosure; indeed, I believe mamma's boudoir has been held, time out of mind, to be the only place duly licensed for the business. Is it not so?"

"Decidedly!" replied the mother, with an aspect of the most perfect contentment.

The car was now at the door, and the rector's well-fed horse found that he was expected to step out; yet was the drive one of the happiest intervals of their lives, for never did hope decorate the future with brighter colours than those through which both parents contemplated the destiny of their darling as they jogged along.

The two girls looked strangely surprised when they saw their father and mother enter the little drawing-room at Appleton, where they were both very amiably engaged in indulging their aunts, by attending, with dutiful good humour, to all they were saying, each one being mounted at the moment on her particular hobby. Miss Christina, during the last half-hour, had been

proving to Margaret, by a regular logical process, that woman, when she had happily attained a certain age, was, at the very least, as capable of assisting at the councils of the nation assembled in Parliament as men; and the gentle Miss Lucy, with her silver voice pitched hardly above a whisper (that it might not interfere with the oration of "sister Christina"), was explaining to Isabella the absolute necessity of having a *little* silk for the light shades of her eternal carpet-work.

"Is anything the matter, mamma?" exclaimed Margaret, in alarm.

"Nothing at all, my dear," replied Mrs. Worthington, slightly colouring; "what makes you think there is?"

"We were inclined for a drive," said the rector, with more self-possession; "the day is delightful, but rather warm; and your mother thought it would be better for you to drive home than to return on foot. Is that another cow, Lucy?—what magnificent horns! How does the great work get on, Miss Christina?—it is an age since you have said anything to me about it."

"Why, really, brother Worthington," began Christina—But not all Miss Lucy's habitual reverence for every word that proceeded from the mouth of her sister could prevent her from coming forward with her warm-hearted affectionate greetings to Mrs. Worthington and the rector, or check her saying *almost* aloud, "I hope you are not going to take away the girls?—it is such a treat to have them!—and we dine so early that they would get home long and long before dusk."

There was a little flutter of spirits about Mrs. Worthington at this moment that rendered it extremely difficult for her to find a sufficient reason for the absolute necessity of refusing this invitation, and the words, "It is totally impossible, sister Lucy!" which burst from her were uttered in a tone so exceedingly energetic, that even the reasoning Christina looked puzzled; and Lucy replied in an accent of great surprise, "Good gracious!—why?"

"Good gracious!—why?" repeated the rector, laughing; "because papa and mamma are come to take them home, sister Lucy; and when papas and mammas do a good-natured thing to please their little girls, the little girls must not let them have all their trouble for nothing. So put your bonnets on, children, or our steed may grow impatient."

"Will you not sit down, Mrs. Worthington?" said Miss Clark, looking stiff and affronted.

"Dear sister Margaret!—'tis such a pleasure to see you!" murmured Miss Lucy.

But neither the hard nor the soft remonstrance produced any effect on Mrs. Worthington: she was, in truth, in such a fever

of impatience to be gone that she scarcely heard what either said ; but, hastily kissing them both, she herself tied Isabella's bonnet-strings to expedite the operation, and then darted out of the room and into the carriage very much, as Miss Christina observed afterwards, as if she thought the house were on fire.

The drive home was not embellished by much conversation. The girls were tired, and the heads and hearts of the parents much too full, to permit their discussing any ordinary subjects. No sooner, however, had they quitted the carriage, than Mrs. Worthington placed her arm within that of Isabella, saying,—

“Come to my room, dearest—I want to speak to you.”

“Shall I come too, mamma?” said Margaret.

Mrs. Worthington considered for a moment, and then replied,—

“Yes, my dear, if you wish it. I have no objection.”

There was an appearance of preparation in this that startled Isabella, and, together with the circumstance of their having been followed by her father and mother, brought conviction to her mind that something very much out of the common way had occurred, and that this something related particularly to herself. She had got thus far in her reasoning before many stairs were mounted ; and, ere her fairy footstep reached the last, all Charles's jokes concerning the appearance of the groom rushed upon her mind, together with some agitating recollections of very recent and remarkable looks and attentions which, to say truth, had never been quite out of it for many minutes together since the evening of the race ball.

No word had yet reached her concerning Mr. Wentworth's letter or visit ; nevertheless, her cheeks were flushed and her heart beating before her mother had uttered a single syllable of her embassy. Though this was the first affair of the kind that had happened in the family, Mrs. Worthington, from her *mother* wit and innate instinct, perceived at once that Isabella suspected the nature of the communication she was come to listen to, and the previous gravity of her demeanour was softened by a smile, as she said,—

“Isabella, shall you be very much astonished if I tell you that Mr. Wentworth is coming here this evening expressly to pay you a visit?”

“To pay *me* a visit, mamma? What makes you think so—not Margaret's nonsense I hope, is it?”

“No dearest! I have surer grounds than that for what I say. He has been here this morning, Isabella ; and asked your father's permission to visit you.”

“O mamma!” she exclaimed, and turning to her mother, she hid her blushing face on her shoulder.

"Dearest Isabella!" whispered Margaret; and, adding herself to the group, she took the elected bride by the hand, and, somewhat triumphantly, said, "I knew how it would be! Did I not say so, mamma? Dear, dear Isabella! how very glad I am! Will she not be a happy girl, mamma? Such a man! such a house! such a fortune!"

And thus was the destiny of Isabella as completely settled in this little cabinet council, as if she and her intended bridegroom had discussed the matter at full length themselves. The trio, however, did not part directly, and a good deal of desultory talking followed, in which Mrs. Worthington and Margaret gave utterance to a multitude of happy prophecies, while Isabella listened to them in blushing, trembling, but half-smiling silence.

"Will it not be delightful, mother, to have her for a neighbour?" said Margaret, nestling close to her sister, who sat with one hand clasped in that of her mother, and the other supporting, and half-hiding her beautiful head, her elbow resting on the table. "And fancy us running about together in those beautiful grounds! and then her carriage, and her fine horses! and the conservatories! and all that forest of orange-trees and camelias! Fancy all this belonging to Isabella!"

"And how her dear father will enjoy free access to the noble library! and only imagine aunt Lucy's ecstasy at seeing Isabella rich enough to work an acre of carpet-work, all in silk if she likes it," said her mother.

"I hope, Isabella, that you will let Charles ride some of the fine horses now and then," said Margaret. "He rides beautifully already, and a few lessons from Mr. Wentworth would make him perfect. O mamma! how I shall enjoy going to stay with her!"

At length, however, the proud and happy mother stopped Margaret short in an harangue tending to prove that there was no happiness in life equal to having a sister superlatively well-married within three miles of one's home, by saying,—

"It is all very true, Margaret, but we forget how her poor dear father must be longing to see her. Will you come down, dearest? Or shall papa come up to you?"

"I will go down, mamma," said Isabella, rising; "but, oh! I do so wish that all that was over!"

"Let me tell Charles!" cried Margaret, starting up, "he will be wild with joy."

"And uncle David?" said Isabella.

"I think you must tell uncle David yourself, my dear; poor old man! what will he do without you?"

"I should like to have him come to live with me half the year, mamma," replied Isabella, her eyes filling with tears at the idea

of leaving the sweet-tempered affectionate old man. "I don't think I could tell him of it without letting him understand at the same time that we were not to be parted altogether. Do you think, mamma, Mr. Wentworth would object to it?"

"Why, to tell you the truth," replied Mrs. Worthington, laughing, as she took her arm to lead her down, "I suspect that when a man of Mr. Wentworth's station and fortune takes it into his head to marry such a little portionless girl as you, he is too much in love to object to anything she sets her heart upon."

"Isabella, on hearing this, blushed anew; but smiling away her tears, proceeded to her father's study, as pretty a picture of a young bride elect as ever painter drew. Her heart, however, beat with painful violence as the door opened, and heartily did she wish, as she had told her mother, "that all *that* was over."

Mr. Worthington was sitting alone, and thinking more soberly perhaps than any of the family had yet done upon the subject that engrossed them all.

"God bless you, my sweet love!" he said, rising, and throwing his arms round her; and then, taking her into the recess of the window, and holding her hand while he looked earnestly in her face, he added, "Set my heart at rest on one point Isabella. It is not his wealth and station which lead you to accept him, is it, my love? Do you feel that you prefer him—that you love him, Isabella?"

Isabella was silent.

Her father looked at her anxiously: "If you are not quite sure of your affection for him, my child," he continued, "say so, I conjure you. For Heaven's sake, let no idea of giving us pain prevent your speaking plainly! If you wish to avoid this visit, Isabella, say so at once, and I will instantly write to declare it. Shall I send to prevent his coming this evening, Isabella?"

"No!" said Isabella, distinctly; and though the solitary word was spoken almost in a whisper, and was assisted by no commentary from her eyes, for they were fixed upon the carpet, her father was satisfied; and kissing her forehead, fervently repeated "God bless you!" adding cheerfully, "I wish you joy heartily, my Isabella. You have won the affection of a man of excellent character, agreeable manners, and noble fortune—you are a lucky girl."

Just at this moment Margaret entered, preceded by Charles with gestures so joyous and uncouth, that he looked like a young satyr frolicking before the car of Ariadne.

"Mrs. Wentworth of Oak Park!" he cried, bowing low before Isabella, "permit me to wish you all manner of joy; and at the same time permit me to wish myself a little into the bargain. Shall I not look like something and somebody when I am a



brother to Mrs. Wentworth of Oak Park? May I keep a dog in your stables, Isabella—you know papa won't have any here but Neptune; will you Isabella?" and the petition was enforced by a hearty kiss.

"And uncle David?" said Isabella, kissing him in return, and then endeavouring to escape. "I cannot bear that he should be left alone wondering where we are all gone; where is he?"

"Come along!" said Charles; "I'll lead you to him in triumph; and as he spoke, he laid violent hands upon her, and drew her after him.

"No, no, Charles; let me alone, dear boy. Papa, let me go to uncle David with nobody but you."

This appeal was successful; and Isabella, her sweet face speaking more of sadness than of joy, put her arm within that of her father, and sought the old man in the drawing-room.

He was sitting in his wonted arm-chair before a pleasant window at the bottom of the room, opening upon a little flower-garden.

It is seldom that advanced old age retains the appearance of so much independent enjoyment as was usually legible on the countenance of Colonel Seaton. A sweet and kindly temper, which neither age nor misfortune had spoiled, was the broad and sure foundation on which he had been able, under all circumstances, to sustain a system of practical philosophy of which religion might be called the soul, and good sense the body. His clear, graphic, and most accurate memory of events and persons long gone by, was a source of constant enjoyment to himself; more recent events seemed to have passed lightly over him; for even those which had been marked by considerable pain, were not engraven with sufficient distinctness on his memory to interfere much with the ever fresh and bright panorama furnished by his early recollections. He would often sit in an attitude of comfortable listlessness, his eyes half closed, and his hands laid one over the other on his breast, and continue thus, almost without moving, for hours together, if not called from the inward to the outward world by the near approach of those around him. But if any long-past circumstance of interest was alluded to, the remembrance of which still rested on his mind—if in any way the chord of his youthful reminiscences was touched, it instantly vibrated throughout his whole frame—he raised his head, throw forward his chest, and braced every fibre till his very hands appeared to rouse themselves from their lethargy, and partake in the revived animation. When this happened, all who knew him well became instantly silent; and then there would burst from those withered lips a flow of anecdote that richly repaid the attention with which it was

listened to, for it always transported the hearers, as by the wand of a magician, into the middle of the last century. Names that have long borne the permanent value which history gives to renown, were familiar in his mouth as household words; and traits of character, *bon mots*, and epigrams were poured forth as from a storehouse, where they had been long preserved, and into which no recent light had entered to fade their freshness.

The entrance of Isabella and her father did not immediately rouse him, for his eyes were fixed upon a particular flower in the garden, and it was only when Isabella put her arm, as she often did, around his neck, that he turned his eyes from it to look at her.

"Dear uncle David," she said, in a voice which betrayed considerable emotion, "I am come to tell you some news, and as it is about myself, I would let nobody tell it to you but me."

Colonel Seaton could not be called deaf, for the soft clear voice of Isabella always appeared more distinctly audible to him than any of the loud talking which his age frequently drew from others who wished to be attentive to him; yet sometimes the sounds his ears received did not appear to reach his intellect clearly, and this was the case now; for turning round and looking wistfully in Isabella's face, he said, "What was it, my dear child, you just now said to me?"

"I said, uncle David—that is, I am come to say that—I am, I believe, going to be married, if you approve it."

There could be no doubt that the old man distinctly heard what she said, yet he still continued to look at her with a perplexed and troubled expression of countenance, and for a minute or two they were both silent; but at length he said, "It is all true, then? And what does Henry say? Where is your papa? Ask your papa, my dear; don't do anything without asking your papa."

"Here I am, sir," said Mr. Worthington cheerfully, and coming in front of the dim-sighted old man. "Isabella is not going to marry without asking me, and her mother too; and, if you approve the match as much as we both do, we shall all be happy together."

"Dear little girl," said Colonel Seaton, bending forward to kiss her forehead, for she was on her knees before him, "I think she is too good for anybody but her own father and mother. Remember, my dear, that you must never come and see us if it should happen that you are not quite gay and happy. We must never see that innocent young face look sorrowful, Isabella."

"There is no danger of that, uncle David," said Mr. Worthington, drawing a chair and sitting down by him. "We have not told you yet, sir, who the happy man is. There is not a young

lady in the county who might not envy our little Isabella. Who do you think it is, sir?"

"Mr. Wentworth," replied Colonel Seaton.

"It is, indeed; and who told you so, uncle David?"

"I heard them talking about it last night, and it is all very natural. He is the richest man, and has got the finest house of anybody hereabouts, and of course he thinks he has the best right to have the prettiest, and the dearest—poor little thing! Is she not very young, Henry?"

"Why, she is not very old, uncle David," replied Mr. Worthington, laughing; "but she was eighteen last birthday, you know, and all young ladies consider that as an excellent marrying age."

"Yes, I remember her birthday. Good-bye, then, Isabella, God bless you, my dear!" and the old man dropped his head upon his breast, and closed his eyes as if he wished to sleep.

"Do not bid me good-bye yet, uncle," said Isabella, kissing his hand. "It will be a great while before it happens, and when it does, you need not bid me good-bye, for I want you to promise that you will live half of every year with me."

The poor old gentleman threw his trembling arms round her, and wept upon her shoulder like a child.

"You will promise, uncle David, will you not?" said Isabella soothingly.

"Promise to live with Mr. Wentworth," he replied. "No, my dear, I think I had better not promise yet. Perhaps he may not love me so well as you do."

"He is so good and excellent a man," said Mr. Worthington, "that there is little fear of his not loving all she loves. But there is the first dinner-bell. Go, Isabella, it is time you should be at your toilet, my dear. Remember, we expect company."

The bride elect, having given her aged uncle a very tender kiss, obeyed the command of her father; and after she left the room, Mr. Worthington endeavoured to cheer the old man's spirits by dwelling on the excellent character of his future son-in-law, the high esteem borne to him by the whole neighbourhood, and the great advantage such a connection must be to all the family.

"Ay," said the old man, again shutting up his eyes, and apparently desirous of seeking repose, "all that will be very lucky."

## CHAPTER III.

THE interval between quitting the dinner-table and the arrival of the expected guest was a nervous one to all the party, and as for poor Isabella, there were moments in which she felt perfectly breathless, and greatly disposed to elope into the fields with Neptune, leaving all mention of love and lovers behind. The whole family, with the exception of herself and her mother, were assembled in the drawing-room; but they, at the recommendation of Mr. Worthington, continued to saunter about the shrubberies, not quite in sight of the drawing-room windows, yet not so completely concealed as to render it difficult for any one entering the garden to find them, if he happened to be interested in the search. But few words passed between the mother and daughter during these trying moments of expectation, the one being incapable of speaking, and the other too well aware of it to put her to the test.

At one point of their silent promenade they were startled by a sudden bounding step through some bushes near them. Neptune rushed past immediately after; but turning their eyes the way he went, they perceived it was only Alfred Reynolds, whom he followed, and who the next minute was seen to spring over the hedge which divided the garden from a copse that made part of the glebe. To have reached it by the gate, he must have passed them, and this, as it seemed, he did not wish to do.

"What a charming creature that Alfred Reynolds is!" exclaimed Mrs. Worthington, "I am certain he did not choose to pass us, because he knows all about it—so thoughtful and gentlemanlike!"

Though this shrubby ramble had not lasted long, Mrs. Worthington felt comforted and relieved when the sound of horses' feet was heard on the other side of the laurel hedge; but Isabella started at the sound, as if a cannon-ball had passed within an inch of her ear; and tightening her hold upon her mother's arm, she endeavoured to make her turn back, that they might reach a place of concealment. But Mrs. Worthington, though she had hitherto during the nervous promenade humoured every whim, or shadow of a will, that her trembling girl expressed, whether to walk east or west, faster or slower,

now steadfastly resisted her attempts to fly; and before Isabella had succeeded in withdrawing her arm preparatory to taking flight alone, Mr. Wentworth had caught sight of them through the trees, sprung from his horse, found his way through a side gate, and the next moment was at their side.

Had Isabella dared to look at him, she might have perceived enough in his good looks and graceful deportment to confirm the preference which his marked and flattering notice had generated in her young heart. Mr. Wentworth had, indeed, abundant good gifts, for the which a young lady might "suffer love" for him. His abilities were of a superior order; his manners eminently graceful and dignified; his stature rather above the middle height, well formed, and elegant in his movements, and his fine regular features might have been pronounced even by a statuary to be almost perfect. But Isabella now saw nothing of all this, and would, had choice been left her, have very gladly found herself at the distance of a hundred miles from him. Choice, however, was not left her, and what was worse still, her mother's support was not left her either: for Mrs. Worthington, cruelly disengaging herself from her daughter's grasp, in order to advance a step to receive the expected intruder, took advantage of the freedom thus obtained, and skilfully turning round a large Portugal laurel, made her way through the shrubbery, and was out of sight and out of hearing too, before ever Mr. Wentworth had sufficiently recovered himself to pronounce any word that was audible.

It is quite a mistake to suppose that, in scenes of this description the lady is the only party that suffers from embarrassment; the gentleman not seldom endures very nearly as much, and though Mr. Wentworth was very heartily in love, he, too, for the first five minutes, would not have been sorry had the die been thrown and the young beauty won.

But her weakness, as is ever the case with poor cowardly mortals, made him strong; and when he perceived that she trembled so violently as hardly to be able to stand, he began to feel how exceedingly delightful it was to be with her—and to be with her alone. He speedily got possession of a little passive hand, and it was not long ere he ventured to support her tottering steps by insinuating an arm round her waist, which freedom was the more excusable because he descried a most commodious seat beneath the shelter of a weeping ash at the distance of a few yards; and it was evident that the best thing he could do was to sustain her trembling frame till he could place her on it. Nothing could be more judicious; she very gladly sat down, and then he ventured to utter the very boldest hope that man can express to woman—namely, that she would leave father

and mother, and cleave only unto him till death should part them.

And Isabella heard all this, yet, weak as she was, she did not faint; but she wept a little. Yet it should seem that she must have smiled a little too, or in short have done or said something or other in answer to this demand so nearly resembling compliance with it, that within an hour after Mrs. Worthington made her escape the lovers were seen walking arm-in-arm towards the house together, perfectly satisfied with each other, and with courage sufficient to face the whole assembled family without any very apparent shrinking.

The party in occupation of the drawing-room, including uncle David, and even Charles, behaved extremely well. Mr. Worthington stepped forward, and cordially shook hands with his future son-in-law; his wife smiled, and nodded a second welcome, less hurried and agitated than her first. Margaret, who was already seated at the tea-table, preparing to do the honours of it, blushed and smiled, and bowed exactly as she ought to have done, and Charles stood up and returned the friendly salutation he received by a gaily uttered "How do you do, Mr. Wentworth?"

Without rising from his privileged arm-chair, Colonel Seaton made a very graceful bow; and in answer to the young man's courteous greeting, extended his hand and said, but not in a very steady voice, "I sincerely wish you joy, sir."

All this was very well, and just as it ought to be; nevertheless, there was still a little embarrassment and restraint among them. Charles was the first to break through it, for after permitting his bright eyes to discourse a little with those of his eldest sister, he boldly got up, and walked out of the window. But such a manœuvre, agreeable as it was, could extend no farther. Margaret kept fiddling with the tea-cups long after the use of them was over, her mother assiduously assisted her, and Colonel Seaton was sunk in one of his deepest reveries. Of the silent part of the company, Isabella performed her part unquestionably the best; for she sat looking exquisitely beautiful, her soft eyes riveted on the carpet, and a suffusion of such speaking emotion and modesty glowing on her cheek, that not all the language in the world could have equalled it in eloquence.

Meanwhile, Mr. Worthington, did all that man could do to produce something like conversation between himself and Mr. Wentworth; but the moment for ease was not yet come, and great was the relief to all when the lover *en vrai héros*, after giving one enamoured glance at Isabella, took courage to rise from his chair and to say quite loud enough to be heard, "Mr.

Worthlington, may I beg five minutes' further conversation with you in your study?"

Nothing could be more alert than the movement by which this request was complied with, and those they left seemed to breathe more freely when the door closed behind them. Nor was it many seconds before this free breath gave forth words as free.

"You are, indeed, a happy girl, dearest!" exclaimed the mother, moving her chair close to Isabella, and fondly kissing her. "What a man! Is he not, Margaret? Did you ever see any one so perfectly handsome and elegant? And how he looks at her! He is in love, if ever man was. Look up, darling; don't be afraid to look at Margaret and me. Uncle David is asleep, so we are quite by ourselves; and tell me, Isabella, do you not feel happy in the prospect that is before you?"

"Yes, indeed, I do, mamma," said the blushing girl, raising her head from her mother's shoulder, and looking first at her and then at Margaret, with happy laughing eyes. "Oh, I shall so like to have you all about me at Oak Park! And uncle David, and dear good aunt Lucy and all! Mr. Wentworth is so kind, and so gentle, that I feel quite sure of his liking to see me happy in the midst of my dear, dear friends, and of his loving them almost as well as I do myself. How I shall love to make you all happy!"

"Dear creature, that is so like her! Is it not Margaret? But sweet as it is to hear you talk so, it will not satisfy me, Isabella, unless you can tell me truly and sincerely that you love Wentworth with all your innocent heart, and better, dearest, than even you love us. Tell me, do you feel sure you should accept him if he had not Oak Park and ten thousand a year? In short, do you really love him dearly, dearly?"

"Well, then, mamma, be satisfied at once; for I do love him *dearly, dearly.*"

"Did you ever see any one you liked so well?"

"Good gracious, no! and indeed I don't believe that there is anybody in the whole world equal to him."

"Now, then, my Isabella, I am perfectly happy. All I wanted was to hear you say that."

"Surely, mamma, you might have guessed it. Margaret did, long ago."

"Oh, dear yes! I did, indeed," cried Margaret; "two balls ago I was quite sure of it. Oh! you did look so miserable, when Frederic Norris asked you to dance!"

"Why, was it not provoking?" replied Isabella, laughing, "just at the very moment that I saw Mr. Wentworth looking as if he meant to ask me?"

"I dare say it might, Isabella; because I suppose you were very much in love with Mr. Wentworth even then, otherwise I should say—but I suppose you will kill me if I do—that both the Norrises are as pleasant partners as Mr. Wentworth, and that Frederic was almost as handsome."

"O Margaret! you must be blind to say so!" said Isabella.

"I cannot allow you to be a fair judge," replied her sister; "for in fact you know nothing about it. From the very first ball you ever went to in your life, you have never had any eyes for anybody or anything but Mr. Wentworth. I dare say, now, you have never found out that Frederic Norris has finer eyes than the elegant owner of Oak Park?"

"Frederic Norris? What Frederic Norris? Do you mean Mr. Cummyn's curate?"

"Yes, Isabella," replied Margaret, blushing slightly. "I mean Mr. Cummyn's curate."

"If you would give me the whole world," said Isabella, "I could not tell what his eyes are like."

Mrs. Worthington laughed heartily at the earnestness of this asseveration. "I dare say not, my dear," she said: "and Margaret must excuse you; for when one is very particularly occupied in one direction, it is difficult to make accurate observations in another."

At this moment, something like a sigh escaped from Colonel Seaton, and Isabella was at his side in an instant.

"Are you asleep, uncle David?" said she, so softly as to run no risk of waking him, if he were.

"Not quite, my dear," he replied. "Where is Mr. Wentworth? Is he gone away?"

"No, uncle David, he is with Henry, in his study," replied Mrs. Worthington.

"Will he come back again here to-night?"

"I suppose he will come to take a farewell look at Isabella before he goes."

"To be sure he will," replied the old man with emphasis, "to be sure he will; he loves her, I suppose he loves her very much—I must suppose that."

"There can be no doubt on that subject, my dear sir; and she loves him; there is no doubt of that, either, is there Isabella?"

Isabella's only reply to this appeal was whispering in the old man's ear, "And I hope you love him too, dear uncle David?"

"I will love him for your sake, my child. I could love almost anybody that loved you, that is, if the love makes you happy, Isabella."

The drawing-room door opened at this moment, and Mr. Worthington and his future son-in-law re-entered. Mr. Went-



worth's colour was heightened, his eye sparkled with unusual brightness, and his whole aspect spoke excitement and pleasurable emotion. It was less easy to read the countenance of Mr. Worthington; he certainly looked in no way displeased, but there was a slight expression of embarrassment, and rather less of easy gaiety than usual.

The lover immediately approached Isabella; and appearing to have entirely overcome the little awkwardness of his novel situation, took her hand and kissed it without any affectation of restraint.

"I shall see you to-morrow morning, my sweet love," he said, in a voice just sufficiently lowered to show that the words, though audible to all, were intended for her alone; adding, "and I trust that what has passed in my interview with your father, will be satisfactory to you, and prove how devotedly I love you." Again he kissed her hand, and then held it for a while longer, with the happy confidence of prosperous love, gazing without restraint at what his eyes told him was the loveliest face and form he had ever looked upon. Isabella stood this for a moment, with her head turned aside, and her looks fixed on the floor; but conscious that others might be as well aware as herself of this passionate perusal of her features, she raised her eyes to those of Mr. Wentworth, with so beseeching an appeal that he released her, after muttering between his teeth, "Beautiful creature!" He then left her; and pausing for an instant to touch the fingers of Mrs. Worthington as he passed, left the room with a general bow, and was followed to the door by the rector.

Covered with blushes, and painfully averse to reading in the face of her mother what she might think of Mr. Wentworth's unreserved love-making, Isabella walked hastily towards the window which opened upon the lawn, and saying, without turning her head, however, to look at her, "Margaret! come into the garden, will you?" she stepped out upon the grass; and quickly followed by her sister, turned, with a rapid step, towards the shrubberies.

We will not follow the young girls to listen to their secret discussion upon what was, and what was not a permissible degree of freedom in a newly accepted lover, particularly when surrounded with witnesses. Suffice it to say, that upon this occasion it was Margaret who was most on the alert to *prôner* the various excellencies of Mr. Wentworth; a theme which, by degrees, so far softened the offended beauty that, by the time twilight was sufficiently advanced to make Margaret remember they had no shawls on, she consented to return into the house, and say nothing to her mother about it.

Meanwhile, Mr. Worthington, having dismissed his guest, returned into the drawing-room, and was not sorry to find there only his uncle and wife, for what he had to tell was concerning that portion of the matrimonial arrangements which is seldom or never brought as a matter of consultation before the intended bride.

"Come here, my dear," said the father as he placed himself close to Colonel Seaton, "I want to tell you what has passed between us, for, upon my word, I am really puzzled as to what I ought to do."

"About accepting him?" said Colonel Seaton with unusual quickness.

"Why, no, not exactly that, uncle David; but whether I ought to accept his magnificent offers about settlements. I have no very great experience in such matters, but it seems to me that what he proposes is out of all reason for a girl with literally no fortune at all."

"What is it he does propose, Henry?" said Mrs. Worthington.

"He wishes to settle Oak Park on Isabella, with the whole of the estate surrounding it, amounting to a rental of somewhat more than five thousand pounds per annum, to go to the eldest son at her death, if she leaves a son, but if not, to be wholly and for ever at her own disposal."

"An immense settlement, indeed!" replied his wife; "and what is the provision for the younger children, Henry?"

"Ten thousand pounds each out of the remaining property, and the residue to the heir."

"A most satisfactory arrangement I should think," said Mrs. Worthington, "and I really cannot see why you should be puzzled about it, my dear."

"And what do you think, uncle David?" said the rector; "are not these proposals too liberal?"

"I am no very good judge of such matters, Henry, but I should not think it of any great importance how the thing was arranged provided his property was secured to Isabella's children, if she should have any. Mr. Wentworth is quite a young man, and may be as likely to live long as she is, poor dear!"

"Well, then, I suppose I must make no more difficulties about it. Indeed, I believe it would be of no use, for he seems quite determined to have his own way."

"That is very likely," said uncle David.

"Of course," said Mrs. Worthington, "on this point he must feel that he has a right to please himself; but, to be sure, it is the most noble settlement I ever heard of. How I long to tell

my sisters! Will you drive me to Appleton directly after breakfast to-morrow, Henry?"

"And so miss seeing Wentworth when he calls?" said the rector.

"Upon my word, Henry, I don't think that signifies much. From this time forward, I suspect Mr. Wentworth will not feel himself at all offended if he finds all the family flown when he calls, so Isabella be left at home."

"I dare say you are right. But I think I must ride over to call upon him, and ask him to dinner or something of that sort, mustn't I?"

"You must go early, then; for I will venture to say it will not be very late before he is here: so I think I must walk to Appleton."

"No, no, you shall not do that," said the kind husband, earnestly. "I will drive you there immediately after breakfast; the two lads shall go with us, and shall walk on with me to Oak Park, an expedition that will of course delight Alfred, for he has never seen the place. You will have plenty to talk about with your sisters, so will not mind if we do not come back to you till luncheon-time. Will this do?"

"Excellently well, my dear; and Margaret will be left with Isabella, which is proper etiquette, you know, and I am sure she will contrive to be as little in the way as possible."

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## CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Charles made his escape from the drawing-room, his primary object unquestionably was to shake off the restraint which his future brother-in-law's presence had inflicted; but before he had bounded across the lawn, he determined to set off in quest of his friend Alfred. He knew his predilection for a certain hill-side at the distance of about a mile, in a grassy hollow of which he had more than once found his friend cosily nestled with a book, when he had separated from him in order to take a wider scamper himself. To this spot he addressed his steps, and found Alfred there as he expected; but this time he was not reading, being listlessly stretched on his back, his eyes shut, and his arms crossed over his head, while Neptune patiently watched beside him.

At the first glance Charles fancied that his friend was asleep; but the moment he pronounced his name, Reynolds sprang upon his feet.

"Are you come to look for me, Charles?" said he; "it is very kind of you."

"Yes, certainly, I am come to look for you; but I am come to scold you too—what a shirking fellow you are to start off without saying a word to me! It was no matter, however, for of course it was necessary that I should stay at home to receive my brother-in-law. He is a devilish gay fellow, I assure you; and you might just as well have stayed to get a look at him: it would not have kept you long; for, to say the truth, I had very soon enough of seeing the ceremony of installation, so I left them, looking like so many figures cut in wood, and here I am. But is it not a famous thing, Alfred, to have a brother-in-law with a park and ten thousand a year? I'll make him invite you as soon as ever we get to New College, you may depend upon that. He has a glorious trout stream running smack through his park, and such pheasant-covers! and then fancy the dogs, and the horses, and all the rest of it! But I won't have you there till you are an Oxonian—I hate the notion of being invited as schoolboys."

Alfred did not answer him; but a minute or two afterwards he interrupted a fresh tirade upon the brilliant prospects of Isabella by saying, "Charles, I want you to tell your mother and father for me, that I do not think I can stay any longer these holidays, because of my mother."

"Stuff and nonsense, Alfred! you told us all that about your mother a week ago; and as you did not go then, it is quite ridiculous to go now. I should not wonder if we were to be all invited to Oak Park in honour of Isabella, and, may be, we shall have cricket, or some fun or other; so go you shan't."

"Go I must, Charles; and if you won't tell your kind mother and father so, I must—but I wish you would do it for me."

"What can have put this home-going whim into your head again? Does it come upon you once a week, Reynolds?"

"Often more than that, Worthington; and the whim, as you call it, ought to have been attended to earlier. My mother is not so happy as yours, Charles; she has not a husband and two daughters to cheer her when I am away. I am the only son of my mother, and she is a widow. So, to-morrow, please Heaven! I start off, and get to her as soon as I can."

"I am very sorry, indeed, that you will go," replied Charles, now answering seriously what was so seriously said; "but if it must be so, it must. How do you mean to go, Alfred? There is no coach, you know, passes nearer than Taunton, and I'll bet a guinea you can't have the car to-morrow—mamma will be sure to drive over to aunt Clark's to tell them the glorious news."

"Oh, I shall walk," said Alfred.

"Why, Reynolds, it is nine miles at the very least."

"Nine miles! three times nine miles would not hurt me, Charles; indeed," he added, colouring slightly, "I think it is very likely I shall walk all the way home."

"All the way home! why it is thirty miles if it is a step. Let me feel your pulse, Alfred. I am quite sure now that you are delirious."

Young Reynolds smiled, but not very gaily, as he replied, "Perhaps I am; but I daresay the fit will go off when I get a little of my mother's nursing."

"And your trunk, my walking philosopher, what is to become of that?"

"The Abbot's Preston carrier must take it to Taunton, and then it will come on by the Exeter waggon, which will leave it within half a mile of my mother's house."

The two lads did not get back to the rectory till Margaret and Isabella had retired for the night; but Mr. and Mrs. Worthington were still in the drawing-room, and Charles announced his friend's intention of leaving them on the morrow.

Had this departure been mentioned two days before, it would have produced a greater effect, for Alfred was greatly liked by his kind hosts; but at that moment their heads and hearts were so full of the great event which had marked the day, that they received it with friendly expressions of regret, but without any strong demonstration of surprise; so Alfred took his leave of them and went to bed, secretly determined to set off on his long walk some hours before any of the family should be stirring; for he shrunk from the thoughts of the farewells he should have to utter and receive, did he meet them all at breakfast. Even of Charles he determined to take no formal leave; and it was Neptune only who received his last adieu, patted and gently pushed back at the same time, that he might not quit the house and follow him, a catastrophe not at all improbable from the warm friendship which had sprung up between them.

High-spirited as he was, and manly as he wished to be, Alfred Reynolds could not prevent his last look at the pretty parsonage from being dimmed by a tear; but he walked stoutly forward, thought as much of his mother and as little of Isabella as he could, and had recovered himself sufficiently after walking about a dozen miles to enjoy a bowl of milk and no contemptible portion of brown bread and butter at a farmhouse that he fortunately came upon in his compass-directed march over hill and dale. Poor fellow! life did not open very brightly before him. His mother had been left a widow with this only child, when he was little more than a year old, and with means so restricted that a woman with less courage would have abandoned all hope

of preserving caste either for her boy or herself. But her father and her husband had both been clergymen ; and no sooner did she raise her head again from the heavy blow that made her a widow, than she steadfastly fixed her resolution to endure anything rather than abandon the hope of seeing her boy in the same profession. This hope, which at first certainly seemed almost a wild one, was not only strengthened and confirmed, but rendered reasonable by her good fortune in getting a nomination for her boy to Winchester College, which he entered at the age of ten. Yet even this good luck, great as it was, could not have availed her much, had not the boy himself been very considerably out of the common way, both as to character and ability ; for he had to practise a degree of economy, the necessity for which it is difficult to impress on a child mixing with others subjected to no restraint of the same kind ; and, moreover, it so happened that he had to compete in his race for New College with three or four lads of much more than ordinary capacity and scholarship. Nevertheless, he had weathered all difficulties so well, that his mother's tiny income had never been exceeded ; and when he left Winchester with his friend Worthington at the beginning of the present holidays, he stood second on the college roll.

He was a singular boy, this Alfred Reynolds, in many respects ; and, as he may appear again in the course of the narrative, it may be as well to add a few words respecting some of his peculiarities before we dismiss him now. His person has been already described ; it had been up to this period such as to seize by force, and, of necessity, the good-will and liking of every one that looked upon him ; but there was certainly at this time some danger that, unless his stature underwent a great and speedy alteration, one of the loveliest boys that ever gladdened a mother's heart might become that least comely of nature's varieties—a stumpy, round little man. But these external accidents, though strangely important on a first acquaintance, were not among the peculiarities that most essentially marked the widow's son. It was the temperament that, from the moment his understanding received the idea of his mother's having to struggle with difficulties, had caused him—made him—enabled him (I know not which is the better phrase) to feel for her and for her situation exactly the same sort of instinctive tender interest that the generality of human beings feel for themselves. It would be difficult to follow the effect of this into all its ramifications ; for the minuter traits, though perhaps, from their continuity, the most important, could not, of course, be recorded without tedious prolixity ; but the whole system, influencing, as it did, every feeling and every act, was one of great moral beauty.

The admirable arrangement at Winchester College, by which much of the instruction and even discipline of the little boys is intrusted to the elder ones, is accompanied by the payment of two guineas, I believe, for each pupil; and Alfred had six, producing an income sufficient to be of most essential relief to their finances. Such being the case, the reason for the boy's wishing to take so very long a walk may be easily understood. As the miles wore away beneath his unheeding steps—for he was too much engrossed in meditation to think of bodily fatigue,—the familiar objects within reach of his home rambles recalled his thoughts to the dear mother whose peace was the treasure that, in his heart and soul, he valued and cherished beyond all else; and, as he thought of her and of the dear anxious look she would fix upon his face, and upon the happiness he should read in her gentle eyes if he appeared before her well and happy, he manfully determined to shake off all the woebegone heaviness of spirit in which he had been indulging during his walk, to think of the too beautiful Isabella no more, and to live again only for his mother and his books. As he made this wise resolution, he turned round, and, facing the enchanted region he had left, took off his hat, waving a farewell towards it with a mixture of boyish frolic and real feeling that furnished a very faithful index to the state of his mind.

We shall hear no more of poor Alfred Reynolds for a long time; but it may be mentioned, in taking leave of him, that Charles Worthington picked up a scrap of paper scribbled with the following lines, evidently a fragment only, the paper having been torn across, and the opening lines torn with it:—

“ Yet poets will sing of the pleasures of youth,  
 And swear that young morning's the season of joy !  
 'Tis a fanciful thought, void of nature and truth,  
 That gives sorrow to manhood and bliss to the boy.  
 “ The sun struggles through mist ere the dewdrops are dry,  
 Dull, doubtful, and dark is the dawning of morn ;  
 And unheeded, uncared for will tears dim the eye,  
 While youth, waiting for manhood, is smiled at in scorn.”

Charles knew the handwriting, but thought the lines much too silly to be the composition of his clever friend Reynolds; so he showed them to Isabella, and asked her if she thought it possible Alfred could have transcribed such trumpery. “ I am quite sure, at any rate,” he added, “ that they are not his own; for his verses are always beautiful—he is the best poet in college. Do just read them, Isabella—they are so absurd.”

Isabella did read them; and though she might be as much inclined as her brother, perhaps, or rather more so, to think them absurd, she understood what they meant infinitely better.

And where is the young lady, under similar circumstances, who would not? "Poor boy!" said she; "I am sorry he went without our wishing him good-bye."

"I dare say he started before daylight," said Charles; "he is the finest fellow in the world, but the queerest. Give me that bit of paper, though; for I'll take it to Winchester, and make him pronounce a commentary upon it for the benefit of the whole college."

"No, don't!" said Isabella; and as she spoke she gently tore the fragment into atoms, and gave them to the winds.

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## CHAPTER V.

Mrs. WORTHINGTON, in a most delightfully happy but rather fidgety state of spirits, rose an hour earlier than usual, hurried the servants, in order to have breakfast upon the table before there was anybody down stairs to eat it; and, at last, after taking a most tender and caressing leave of Isabella, mounted the car with her husband and Charles, and set off, in a state of very nearly perfect felicity, for the abode of the Misses Clark.

Though the intercourse between the two families was very frequent, it was not daily, particularly on the part of Mr. Worthington, who was much too actively engaged in his own parish to have time for anything of the kind. The appearance of the party, therefore, elicited an exclamation of surprise from both the sisters. Miss Clark was, as usual, engaged in writing in the snug recess formed by a window that seemed added to the room on purpose to accommodate such a table, such a desk, such a chair, and such a body as those belonging to Miss Christina, all of which were on the smallest scale; and so was the window and the recess it illuminated. Miss Lucy, at the very farthest end of the apartment from this sacred corner, also sat precisely on the exact place she always occupied, namely, the middle of the sofa, each side of which being filled, as well as every atom of the sofa-table that stood before it (excepting only the portion occupied by her embroidering-frame), with the various articles required by her ceaseless and endless carpet-work. There were little pictures of monsters from heaven, earth, and sea, which, in a very anti-mosaic spirit, though in very mosaic style, she first made to herself, and then worshipped. There were worsteds of every colour of the rainbow, and about a thousand shades besides. There were worsted-needles—large, sharp, threatening worsted-needles—stuck into pincushions, morsels of canvas, balls of



worsted, and even into flimsy skeins of worsted, dangerous to every unwary hand that ventured to approach, and all charged, ready for service, with the necessary material for eye, nose, mouth, tail, mane, hoofs, hands, horns, wings, or scales of her respective monsters; in short, each sister was in the atmosphere within which she loved to live; but each seemed at the moment well pleased to quit it for the satisfaction of learning what could have brought their brother and sister Worthington to Appleton so early.

"Wait one moment, ladies," said Mr. Worthington, "before questions are asked or answered, for Charles is waiting at the door for me. When shall we see you at Abbot's Preston? Do fix a day, Madge, before you leave our good sisters. Good-bye; good-bye. I won't stay another moment, for I plainly see you are dying to get rid of me, that you may hear all about it."

"All about what?" said Miss Clark, rather fretfully. "You know I can't bear riddles, sister Worthington. I am so much in the habit of avoiding everything of the kind in my own writings, that whatever is not perfectly clear is particularly disagreeable to me. What does Mr. Worthington mean?"

"If you stand up looking so distressed, sister Christina, I shan't be able to tell you all. Sit down, and let us be comfortable, for I really have a great deal to tell you."

"Take care of the needles, Margaret," said Miss Lucy, in her soft sweet voice. "Don't sit down there—here, here is a place for you. And now for your news; I am perfectly dying for it."

"I have a great mind," said Mrs. Worthington, smiling with ineffable satisfaction, "to make you both guess what it is about. What do you think, Christina?"

"Nay, my dear, my *forte* lies rather in the clear development of incontrovertible truth, than in the idle ingenuity of guessing," replied Miss Clark. "However, I confess an idea does strike me as probable. It is evident that your news is both agreeable and important. Perhaps my brother Worthington has, according to my suggestion, written to Mr. Murray, of Albemarle-street, and has received for answer that he is willing to purchase my work on the powers of the female mind. If this be so," continued Miss Christina, fervently clasping her hands, "you may well look pleased, both of you; for it is impossible to say to what extent the whole of your family might be benefited by such a decision. Mr. Worthington, in particular, might very likely be brought forward, by his near connection with me, into notice that might lead to——"

Miss Christina paused for a moment; of which accident Miss Lucy took advantage, and eagerly uttered—

"Have the girls had any new patterns sent them?"

"Neither the one nor the other!" cried Mrs. Worthington, laughing, "but it is that which may, for anything I know to the contrary, help you both on, my dears, in your different ways, more effectually than anything else in the world. What say you to Isabella's becoming mistress of Oak Park, with a settlement of five thousand a year at her own disposal?"

"You don't mean that she's going to be married to Mr. Wentworth?" said Miss Christina, very solemnly.

"Yes, but I do," replied Mrs. Worthington, joyously.

"My darling Isabella!" cried the gentle Lucy, clasping her hands, "nothing can happen to her better than she deserves, and may God for ever bless her and make her happy in all ways!"

"Is she not a fortunate girl?" demanded the delighted mother. "Such a very charming man as Wentworth, in every way, and beyond all comparison the first match in the county!"

"It is a great connection," said Miss Clark, with an air of profound meditation; "a very great connection, sister Worthington, and I am not without hope that the young gentleman is capable of estimating the qualities and the faculties of all those with whom such a marriage will bring him in contact. I do not mean to say—I have no intention of saying—that the circumstance I am about to mention has been directly instrumental in bringing about this very fortunate proposal, but certain it is, and involving a very singular coincidence, no doubt, that about six months ago we dined with him at Mr. Leader's. You must remember the circumstance, sister Lucy?"

"Oh! yes, perfectly," replied Lucy, "it was the first time that I ever saw a copper tea-kettle worked in tent-stitch; it is upon one of the footstools, you know."

"On that day," resumed Miss Clark, "I sat by Mr. Wentworth at dinner; and though I do not usually pay much attention to the ordinary run of fashionable young men, who, for the most part, appear to me a useless burden upon the earth on which they stand, I was on this occasion tempted to address my neighbour in consequence of the grave expression of his eye; it seemed to me to announce great depth of thought. I, therefore, said to him, when he happened to turn towards me for the purpose of helping himself to a dish handed to him by a servant, and which was evidently the production of a *French*, and therefore of a *man* cook. 'Do you not think, sir, that this taking from the female the culinary labour which, in this country, has so long been her portion, predicts an era of more dignified usefulness to her? May we not hope,' said I, perceiving that he did not fully understand me,—'may we not hope to see the time when the equality which nature has established between the male and

female intellect shall have fair play permitted to its exhibition ; and that the senate, the pulpit, and the bar may all profit by the acknowledged brilliance of female eloquence ?' It would not be seemly for me to describe the effect produced by words uttered by myself ; you must, both of you, therefore, excuse my dwelling upon the expression of Mr. Wentworth's fine countenance on this occasion ; it is enough to say that he was profoundly silent, and continued to eat what was before him with an air of absence that plainly enough indicated it was not his dinner he was thinking of. He has now selected one of my nearest relatives for his wife. I trust that he will in no way be disappointed in what he anticipates from this union. I shall not scruple to open my views to him entirely ; and it is not improbable that he may himself, being in Parliament, become the means of bringing forward the subject which produced so strong an impression upon him."

Both Mrs. Worthington and her sister Lucy were so accustomed to listen to their sister Christina with respect, and to receive whatever they could not understand, rather with silent admiration than impertinent questionings, that they now heard all she said without a syllable of interruption, though the mother was longing to tell, and the aunt to hear, all and every particular relating to the interesting business under discussion. Their amiable forbearance, as generally happens upon such occasions, soon received its reward ; Miss Christina now felt, as she had often done before, that excellent as her sisters were in many respects, they were neither of them endowed with the species of intellect which might enable them to comprehend and take an interest in her own enlarged views. She therefore rose from the chair she had taken by the side of Mrs. Worthington ; and giving her a little conciliatory tap on the shoulder with the pen she still held, proving by this familiar action, as well as by a condescending smile, that she did not leave the little conclave from any feeling of displeasure, she said, " I do assure you that I like your news very much, sister Worthington, and I shall hold myself in readiness to come and meet Mr. Wentworth whenever you name a day ;—but I am in the middle of the prefatory chapter of a new section, so I must go to my corner. You must not talk very loud, you know, and then I shall not mind your going on ; and if you tell Lucy anything more of importance, she can repeat it to me while we are at dinner.—Good-bye, my dear Margaret ; give my love to Isabella, and tell her I shall at all times be ready to converse with Mr. Wentworth on any subject he may wish."

So saying, the diminutive spinster withdrew to her little writing-table, leaving her sisters to their happy *tête-à-tête*.

"O sister Margaret, what news this is!" said Miss Lucy, in her accustomed well-taught whisper. "How can we ever be thankful enough for such happiness! But you must have a great deal more to tell me yet, my dear. How did it happen, Margaret?—But, to be sure, she is such a beautiful creature, that, delightful as it is, there is no great wonder in it after all."

"Pray do not say that, Lucy!" answered Mrs. Worthington; "it sounds like ingratitude to Providence. Isabella is very beautiful,—but we had none of us any right to suppose, or to hope for a moment that such a marriage as this would come in her way. Think of Oak Park, Lucy, and of our going there just as if it was our own!—Dear Charles is dreaming of hunting and shooting, as you will believe; and I own I can't help thinking of Mr. Worthington having all the new publications as soon as they are out, for Mr. Wentworth buys everything;—and Margaret, too!—think what a thing it is for her! Of course, he will have a house in London now, though hitherto he has only had rooms at Mivart's, when attending his duties in Parliament. However, I have no doubt Isabella will have a London house, and an opera-box too, I dare say; and though Margaret is not so strikingly beautiful as her sister, I cannot say I shall be much surprised if she, too, were to make an excellent match, brought out as she will now be."

"You may depend upon it she will," replied Miss Lucy. "But about the wedding-clothes, my dear? Won't it be inconvenient to find money for things in a proper style for Mr. Wentworth's lady? You know, Margaret, I have my little legacy from my cousin Rebecca, which can be sold out at a minute's notice. That fifty pounds has nothing to do with what Christina and I live upon, and brother Worthington could pay me by degrees.—Do say yes, will you?"

"Thank you very much, dear Lucy,—I am sure I will not say no; for I have been thinking already that there will be some difficulty in settling such matters; however, it is not possible that any consideration of that kind should be sufficient to damp one's joy. Henry must for once, I suppose, submit to run in debt a little—and he might have all the silks and satins in Taunton for asking credit. As to trinkets, you know, that must be totally out of the question for us. If Wentworth chooses to give her jewels, it will be all very well,—and his taste is rather splendid, I believe, in everything. But the very utmost we can do, will be to give her what will make an elegant appearance just at first."

"And that will be very easy," said Miss Lucy, "for Nature has made her so graceful, that she looks well in everything. But when is it likely to be, Margaret? I must be thinking of what

I can work for her, dear creature ! There must be a chair, and a cushion, and a footstool, at the very least. What is the colour of the drawing-room furniture at Oak Park ? Not that a match is necessary, rather the contrary, indeed ; for I see everywhere that nobody thinks of matching colours. Don't you think a cat worked on the seat of the chair would look very well, Margaret ?—I think it would look so very natural, just as if it had that moment jumped up. Or, perhaps she would like a wreath of poppies, like Mrs. Gordon's ? Or, what do you say to a huntsman, my dear, with his whip in his hand, and a dog just before him ? I think I must consult the dear child herself, Margaret."

"I am sure she will be delighted to have anything of your working, Lucy. But do you think she ought to be married in white satin in a little country church like ours ? And yet, what *can* she wear but white satin and orange flowers, with her own carriage waiting for her ?"

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For two hours and a half Mrs. Worthington and her excellent sister Lucy continued to converse in this strain, and could have gone on so with the most perfect contentment for many hours longer, but Mr. Worthington and the car arrived, and the consultation was for the time broken up. He brought, however, the agreeable intelligence that Mr. Wentworth would dine at the rectory on the morrow ; and as it was exceedingly evident that the spinster sisters would greatly like to dine there too, Mr. Worthington gave his wife a good-humoured hint that she should ask them, which was joyfully acted upon, being an earlier indulgence of their very natural desire than she had ventured to hope for. Miss Christina accepted the invitation with an inclination of the head that said a great deal, and Miss Lucy exclaimed, with heightened colour and her own sweet smile, "How very kind of you !"

Charles had taken his own way home, over hedges and ditches, in order to recount to the first person he should meet, with as little delay as possible, all the wonders which this, his first *entrée* at Oak Park, had disclosed to his view ; so the rector and his lady again enjoyed a *tête-à-tête* drive,—an arrangement which, in the present state of affairs, was really a luxury.

How blithely did the parents, in a dialogue as harmonious as ever was performed by two voices, go on to specify, each in their turn, like two shepherds in gentle pastoral contest, all the sources of happiness to be anticipated from Isabella's brilliant nuptials ! and happy was the kiss and the smile with which they received, on their arrival at home, her blushing confession, that Mr. Wentworth had just left her !

Wise folks may laugh if they will at female affection for finery ; but there are many occasions in life, wherein it appears very like a providential antidote against cares and sorrows that would have opportunity to eat much deeper into women's hearts without it.

Perhaps nothing can more satisfactorily exemplify this important truth, than the state of mind of a young girl, whose sister, cousin, or friend, is about to be made a happy bride, while she herself does not happen to have any such hopes immediately before her. How forlorn, how woe-begone would her condition be, as the fond pair stole away from her, did no visions of bridal, and bridemaïdal paraphernalia remain to console her. A vast variety of other instances might be quoted to prove the truth of the observation ; but this will suffice, as being german to the matter before us. The pretty Margaret might have felt a little *triste*, perhaps, when left alone in the drawing-room, afraid even to dart across the lawn to her own flower-garden, lest she should come within sight of the lovers, had not her mind been fully and entirely employed upon the same question that had occupied her mother and her aunt Lucy ; namely, whether the bride should be in satin, or silk ; whether she herself should be in silk, or muslin ; what dresses there must be for dining out afterwards ; together with such a long list of *etceteras* of and concerning the pretty preparations for a wedding, that it was only about five minutes before Mr. Wentworth departed, that she found time to heave one sigh, as she thought of the curate of Hammerton, and of his decided superiority in all things, save wealth, not only to Mr. Wentworth, but to every other ~~he~~ existing.

The dinner of the following day had neither the awkwardness which Mr. Worthington had feared might arise from the introduction of the Misses Clark ; nor yet did it bring the opportunity which Miss Christina anticipated, for making Mr. Wentworth fully aware of the expansive powers of mind to which he was about collaterally to connect himself ; for that gentleman was so completely in love, that he was, in truth, hardly aware of the addition of the two ladies to the family party ; and, with the exception of an occasional "If you please," or "No, I thank you," never addressed a word to any one but Isabella, so long as the ladies were in presence. During the very short interval that they were separated after dinner, the time was employed by the young man in eagerly asking the opinion of his future father-in-law, as to how the settlements, and other preliminary matters, could be got through, so as to occasion the least possible delay of his happiness. The rest of the evening passed much as it might have done, if Isabella and her adorer had vanished to carry on their wooing at the antipodes ; for, profiting

by the easy exit of the open window, they left the drawing-room, while the party were taking tea, and appeared, only at intervals, athwart the shrubs as long as the soft summer twilight lasted.

Mrs. Worthington, Lucy, and Margaret did very well; for they seated themselves in a sort of solid phalanx, of which their knees made the centre, and which no reasonable person would think of invading, thereby securing the inestimable advantage of uninterrupted discourse. Colonel Seaton was dozing; and Charles, almost as intently occupied as Mr. Wentworth himself, was enjoying a deliberate examination of the beautiful little phaeton in which his future brother had driven himself over.

By this statement it will be perceived that Miss Christina Clark and the rector of Abbot's Preston were, to all intents and purposes of private conversation, *tête à tête*;—an arrangement which, to say truth, Mr. Worthington usually avoided, from a consciousness that he was by no means equal to his elder sister-in-law on those abstruse points of political economy upon which she particularly loved to expatiate. But now she had drawn her chair close to his, and more than one motive prevented his pleading, as heretofore, when similarly situated, the necessity of finishing some occupation in his study. First, he did not wish to leave the room, lest Mr. Wentworth, on returning to it, might deem his absence rude; secondly, he good-naturedly feared that Miss Christina might have thought herself neglected during the day; and, thirdly, he flattered himself that the present situation of his family would, of necessity, furnish a theme that must, for once, relieve him from the science, of which, in the presence of Miss Christina, he lived in such a perpetual dread.

On this last point, however, he was completely mistaken; for just as he had turned his benignant face towards the lady, and pronounced the pleasant words,—“Well, sister! what do *you* say to our goings on?” she uttered, so eagerly as to prevent her hearing what he said, “Well, brother! this is a favourable opportunity for me to explain to you a little the contents of my last chapter!”

Mr. Worthington felt himself overcome, mastered, and held captive; and with resignation, which arose partly from despair and partly from sweet temper, he prepared himself to endure, without wincing, all that her genius and learning could inflict.

“It is some time, Miss Christina,” said he, “since we have conversed on the subject of your literary labours. Have you written much this summer?”

“It is very difficult, brother Worthington,” she replied, “to find a time when you are sufficiently at leisure to make it worth while for me to open on the subject. Your sermons, my good sir, appear to occupy a large portion of your time, and nobody

can deny, certainly, that another considerable portion of it is very meritoriously employed in attending to the temporal as well as the spiritual condition of your parishioners; but I cannot help thinking sometimes that your labours would be greatly lightened, and the benefits you seek to confer more effectually obtained, were you to pay a little practical attention to the system I have so repeatedly endeavoured to develop to you."

"What, about ladies becoming members of Parliament, Miss Christina? I don't see exactly what the poor of my parish would gain were I to devote myself ever so heartily to the study of your favourite theory."

"It is the principle, the broad general principle, of which I speak, Mr. Worthington. You are not, I am afraid, of sufficient influence in the country to do much towards reforming the flagrant injustice of suffering millions of highly-enlightened beings, who live and die as much devoid of all political rights as the beasts which perish. It is not of this first and highest part of the subject that I now speak; I was merely alluding, while referring to your own too engrossing labours, to the obvious absurdity of suffering all the females of your parish,—probably the most intelligent portion of your population,—to remain unemployed in any parochial duty. Were some of them to be appointed overseers and churchwardens, you may depend upon it you would find yourself relieved from an immense load of unnecessary trouble. And would you, my dear sir, take courage, and set the great example of appointing a female curate (the most desirable and important article of reform that the country can call for), I will venture to say you would soon find very little left for you to do."

"That I think is very likely," replied the rector smiling; "though perhaps, Miss Christina, I might now and then find something to undo. But do you know that I think there is a text which makes rather strongly against your scheme for female curates. Does not Saint Paul say, 'Let your women keep silence in the churches?'"

"Saint Paul! How is it possible, Mr. Worthington, that a man of your capacity can quote Saint Paul upon a political regulation of the nineteenth century? How on earth should poor dear Saint Paul know what it would be right and proper to do eighteen hundred years after he was dead and buried? Such notions are really contemptible. I am an excellent Christian, all the world knows that, for I take extremely good care that nobody shall ever hear me say a word that might be turned or twisted into the contrary. But as to referring to Saint Paul upon parish business, you really must excuse me."

Mr. Worthington knew the nature of Miss Christina's superior



intellect much to well to reason with her, so he only replied, with a smile of more pity than scorn, "You are not very old yet, Miss Christina; perhaps one of these days you may think differently; but even now considering you are such a good Christian, I may hint a doubt whether you do not rather degrade our dignity, as clergymen I mean, by calling our appointment parish business."

"Oh! I only spoke of the curates," replied the lady; "I have not studied political economy for a dozen years without knowing that whatever class can contrive to get possession of freehold property must, so long as they are permitted to hold it, have a real and positive influence in the country. But curates, you know, that is, the gentry so called at the present day, can certainly have no importance of this kind attached to them; and if they are not actually appointed by the parish authorities, you may depend upon it they will be soon. I mark the signs of the times, Mr. Worthington; and were there as much sagacity among men as among sparrows, society would not long remain ignorant of a truth equally notorious and important; namely, that to single women, those who hold themselves apart from the meaner offices of their sex, to such it especially belongs to keep a look out upon what the world is doing. There is a stirring spirit within us that leads us, as by inspiration, to the task, and were we listened to as we ought to be, many of the worst political blunders that still continue to exist would be speedily removed."

"And what," said Mr. Worthington, endeavouring to conceal a yawn,—“what have you said in your last chapter?”

"That chapter is dedicated wholly to the discussion of the elective franchise," replied Miss Clark; "the elective franchise, I mean, as it regards women. I therein give a sketch, in what I think you will allow is my best manner, of the deplorable degradation of females under the present tyrannical system, and show with much clearness that were they restored to their natural rights in society, all those terrible scenes of vice, which even the purest among us but too well know exist, would disappear. Even this consideration alone, though by no means the most important, ought of itself to be sufficient to give women the right of election, and which is infinitely more essential still, that of being elected also."

"And is all that proved in your last chapter, Miss Christina?"

"No! That is, as I think I told you, wholly dedicated to the elective franchise, as it relates to women. The next step, by far the most important left for England to take in her great onward course of reform—for the mere setting aside a king, and choosing a president, would be nothing to it—the next step in my chain

of reasoning, as well as of action, is the permitting females to take their places in the great deliberative assembly of the people, and to this I give an entire section, not intending to touch directly upon it till I have examined, step by step, the nature and physiology of women. My purpose is to show, that neither by her formation, nor her capacities, is she unequal to the duties of a member of Parliament—I shall have previously proved her rights as a citizen—and I cannot but flatter myself that the often recognized, and, indeed, universally acknowledged fact of our great superiority in facility of utterance, will go far towards convincing the world that nature did not intend to exclude us from an assembly in which the art of talking is so decidedly the principal requisite.”

By this time, Mr. Worthington, though far from being an absent man, had got back to thinking so much more of his own Isabella in the character of Mr. Wentworth's wife than of her whole sex as members of Parliament, that he very injudiciously exclaimed,—

“I can hardly believe it, now, Miss Christina!”

The *équivoque* was unfortunate, for it roused her to the most active display of her own powers in the feminine accomplishment of which she was speaking, and the happy smile which had accompanied her unlucky brother-in-law's exclamation being, very naturally, mistaken for a look of triumph, lent to her manner a degree of energy which effectually brought him back to the present moment, and made him most heartily wish that it were over. And it was over sooner than he had dared to hope; for some point having been touched upon in the gossipings of the happy trio near the tea-table, upon which his opinion was required, his wife stepped across the room to ask it, and it is hardly necessary to observe, that he rose to meet her; and, with even more than his usual promptitude, to welcome her approach. Mr. Wentworth and his beautiful companion re-entered the room soon after, when good-nights were exchanged, another visit from the ardent lover arranged, and the party separated.

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## CHAPTER VI.

FROM this time all preparations for the wedding, whether legal or otherwise, went on with uninterrupted activity. *The milliner, par excellence*, of Taunton, forgot there was any other lady in the county besides “Miss Isabella Worthington, Mrs. Wentworth, of Oak Park, that was to be.” Mr. Wentworth's coach-

maker, upholsterer, &c., were made thoroughly well to understand that, if they were unpunctual now, they would never be unpunctual to him any more; and if ever a denizen of Lincoln's Inn was made to accelerate his paces at the bidding of mortal man, it was upon this occasion. Small doubt remained on the minds of Isabella's mother, sister, and aunts, as to whether she would be fine enough, for packet after packet arrived, such as few rectory doors ever opened to receive, containing presents from her adorer of the most splendid kind. It might have puzzled many a wise man to discover how the preparing a new wardrobe for one young lady could possibly keep so many people actively, anxiously, and incessantly employed for a whole month together. But so it was, and the pretty bride herself was the only idle person to be seen about the premises. But though idle, the time hung not heavily upon her hands; for not only did Mr. Wentworth pass a considerable portion of every day at the rectory, but she had many serious occupations to attend to, which employed her hours very agreeably. In the first place, Mr. Wentworth wished that she should learn to ride, and no day upon which the sun shone was ever passed without some hours being devoted to her receiving both his lessons and those of his accomplished groom on the science. The loveliest horse that ever lady mounted, the loveliest riding-dress that ever lady wore, were ready for her in an incredibly short space of time after she had consented to commence these equestrian studies. Then Mr. Wentworth was a conchologist, and had a magnificent collection of shells at Oak Park, where a room was fitted up with cases filled with the rarest specimens, and arranged in the most scientific order. To this costly museum Isabella was introduced in company with her mother and sister, and her pretty wonder and admiration at the beauties it contained encouraged her delighted lover to initiate her into the mysteries of his favourite study; so that the tables at the rectory were soon loaded with gorgeous folios, and the few hours not bestowed on love and horsemanship were devoted to shells.

In the course of this happy month, however, an introduction took place, most awful in the eyes of Isabella. The mother of Mr. Wentworth arrived at Oak Park, for the express purpose of making acquaintance with her future daughter-in-law; and though it had never happened to the females of the Worthington family to have the honour of seeing this lady before, she was sufficiently known in the neighbourhood for them to be aware that she was a personage of great importance in every way. Mr. Worthington, indeed, had once enjoyed the privilege of being present at one of the large dinners always given at Oak Park when she was in the country; and many and strict were the examinations

he underwent before the tremendous day arrived on which Mr. and Mrs. Worthington and their two daughters were to be admitted to the same distinction.

"And we are actually going to dine at Oak Park to-morrow!" exclaimed Margaret, the evening before the great event was to take place, and when only the party who were to share in this honour were present. "It is well Charles is safe at Winchester; for I think a knowledge of this fact, were he himself not a party in it, would drive him mad."

"He would probably be madder still if he were a party in it," replied her mother. "Do you remember the state of spirits his morning visit at the Park threw him into? He must be put upon a lowering regimen, I think, before we venture to let him dine there."

"O mamma!" said Isabella, "it is not the dining at the Park that is the awful business—it is the introduction to Mrs. Wentworth! I sometimes think I shall turn round and run away as soon as the drawing-room door is opened."

Mrs. Worthington smiled, and shook her head.

"But just think what it is, mamma! I am to stand to be gazed at, commented upon, and judged by a person who I know must hate me, and whose judgment must be listened to with reverence by the only person in the world I wish to please."

"Why do you suppose she *must* hate you, Isabella," said her father, pushing from him the book he had appeared to be reading.

"Because I know she cannot approve her son's making me his wife; you know how very, very proud she is reckoned, and what great influence she is said to have with him."

"But I see not in that any proof of her hating you, my child. If she did hate you, she would probably use the great influence you speak of to prevent the marriage."

"She may have tried to do so, perhaps, and not succeeded."

"Have you any reason for thinking this? Has Wentworth ever hinted at any such opposition?"

"Oh! no; he is a great deal too proud himself for that; if he has once made up his mind upon anything, I do not believe he would choose it to be thought that anybody could shake him."

"Does not that frighten you, Isabella?" said Margaret.

"No! at least, not very much, because I am sure he feels for me differently from what he does for anybody else."

"Then you think you could shake him, Isabella?" said her father, with a smile, which was not, however, a very gay one.

"Perhaps I do, papa," she replied, blushing very beautifully; "but I do not intend to try; and, therefore, you perceive there is no danger of my finding myself disappointed."

"You are quite right, my dear girl; no woman on the eve of marriage could make a better resolution."

"You have never yet told us, papa," interrupted Margaret, "what Mrs. Wentworth is like in person; old Mrs. Wentworth, the dowager Mrs. Wentworth, as we must call her in future."

"The dowager Mrs. Wentworth, if you please, Miss Margaret; but I strongly recommend your not adopting the word *old*, when speaking of Mr. Wentworth's mother. She is not old, in the first place; and would not, I think, approve of being so described, in the second."

"Does she then affect the dress and manners of a young beauty?" inquired Margaret.

"Not at all; you would look very absurd, I think—at least very unlike any young lady that I ever saw—were you to be dressed as she is."

"Is she still handsome?" inquired Mrs. Worthington.

"Decidedly so," replied her husband.

"I believe I have asked the same question and got the same answer before," she rejoined, laughing; "but I want something more descriptive, and you always seem as if you were afraid to commit yourself by saying too much."

"That, my dear, is because I perceive that the imaginations of my hearers are so extremely upon the *qui vive*, that every word I say will be multiplied and magnified a hundredfold."

"I am sure that is not the case with me, papa," said Isabella, earnestly; "on the contrary, I have taken the greatest pains not to prejudge Mrs. Wentworth upon the strength of anything I have heard in the neighbourhood concerning her. The Quins say she is the proudest person they were ever in company with, but that does not alarm me at all; Marmaduke Wentworth is called proud."

"And you think unjustly?" said her father.

"At least, he has no pride that is likely to be disagreeable to me," she replied.

"That is easily understood, my dear," said Mr. Worthington; "but I don't think it follows that the pride of his mother should be equally innoxious to you—does it?"

"Mr. Wentworth will take care that it never annoys me," said Isabella, gravely.

"And of course he will take care to-morrow that it does not annoy us," said Mrs. Worthington; "you do not imagine, I suppose, that she will be rude to us, Henry?"

"Certainly not," replied the rector, "but I really advise you to ask no more about her; for with all the wish in the world to be accurate in my answers, I feel that every other word I say leads you wrong. Remember, I never saw her but once, and

that was in a large party. You will, I dare say, have a much better opportunity of judging of her real character and manners to-morrow;"—and drawing his book again towards him, he devoted himself to it with so much apparent earnestness, that the party separated for the night without his being again interrupted.

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## CHAPTER VII.

NOTWITHSTANDING all Isabella's confidence in her Marquise, the day that was first to introduce her to the meanwhile mistress of Oak Park was a very nervous one for her; nor did it indeed appear altogether devoid of anxiety for him. More than once he had dwelt on his wish that she should be carefully, and elegantly dressed, that her beautiful hair should be arranged in the manner he most approved, and that she should by no means wear a certain ring, given her by her uncle David, and containing a morsel of his snow-white hair, which, though her taper third finger was rarely without it, was certainly not of the lightest or most graceful fabric. All this she promised faithfully, nor did her sweet spirit see ought to cavil at in the careful observance which dictated his instructions; on the contrary, she read therein nothing but love, that sought to obtain for its object the admiration and approval of every, even the most captious eye.

Most carefully, therefore, though without communicating his instructions to any one, did she observe them; and so well did they succeed, that when Hannah, the long-privileged attendant who had been nurse and lady's-maid to herself and sister from the hour they were born, handed her the gloves which were to complete her toilet, she gave a lingering gaze of love and admiration while the words, "Isn't she an angel, ma'am?" seemed to burst irresistibly from her lips, for Hannah was in general no great talker.

Mrs. Worthington, to whom this effusion was addressed, was standing by, a smiling witness of Isabella's newly-born fastidiousness in the minutiae of ringlets and ribbons, and replying to it only by a nod, ventured to hint that the carriage which was to convey them had been for some minutes waiting at the door.

Blushing for her conscious lingering before that ill-to-please counsellor, her glass, Isabella gave one but half-contented glance more, and silently took her mother's arm as a signal that she was ready.

Not all her haste nor all her agitation, however, sufficed to

make her forget the usual parting kiss to uncle David, who, having long ago given up visiting, made it a condition to his remaining in his happy home that no one should ever refuse an invitation on his account. He had already dined, and was sitting snugly enough before his favourite window, a volume of Walter Scott on his little reading-desk, and fruit and wine at his elbow.

Had he not anticipated this farewell visit from the party, it is possible he might have been found in an attitude less indicative of comfort, and more of meditation; for it is certain that, on hearing the carriage roll away, his spectacles were consigned to their case, the little table and all its *appétissantes* consolations pushed from him, his eyes closed, but not in sleep, while a look of thoughtfulness settled upon his countenance, which in him denoted the activity of the spirit within, though the outward frame was in a position of perfect rest.

The short distance to Oak Park was soon passed, and passed almost entirely in silence; for even the manly heart of the rector felt that the business they were upon was somewhat awful. One, two, three, four servants in gorgeous liveries, with a full-dressed head and chief in black, awaited their arrival in the spacious hall; one among them threw wide the drawing-room door, and another announced their names. The knees of Isabella saluted each other once and again, while her father, on whose arm she leaned, felt her tremble so violently as almost to frighten him. Meanwhile Mrs. Worthington and her eldest daughter advanced before them; and being met in the middle of the magnificent saloon by Mr. Wentworth, were led by him to the sofa at the upper end of it on which his mother sat.

Margaret Worthington was a very pretty creature, and Mrs. Wentworth doubted not, as she was led forward towards her, that she saw the future mistress of Oak Park. This mistake was exceedingly favourable to Isabella; for as Mr. Wentworth, after rapidly uttering the words, "Mrs. Worthington,—my mother," stepped back and took the hand of his affianced bride to present her, the critical eye of Mrs. Wentworth was caught by surprise, and made captive by her incomparably superior beauty. Margaret was fair, blonde, and *mignonne*; a style of beauty particularly uncongenial to the taste of the lady who sat in judgment on her; whereas Isabella was tall, graceful, and dark-eyed, with an air of elegance which even her present agitation could not overcome, and which elicited a mental acknowledgment that, in the matter of beauty at least, the young man had proved himself worthy to be her son.

In defiance of the etiquette which assigned the place beside her on the sofa to Mrs. Worthington, the imperial-looking

dowager placed Isabella there ; and after a very slight bow in return to the salutations of the rest of the family, she addressed herself exclusively to her, endeavouring, with more courtesy than mercy, to lead her at once into conversation.

It was some time, however, notwithstanding this flattering attention, before Isabella sufficiently recovered her composure to be able, in any degree, to return the personal examination with which the eye of Mrs. Wentworth continued to honour her. When she did, she acknowledged the truth of all her father had said ; but greatly wondered he had said no more. In fact, she soon gazed on her future mother-in-law with very nearly as much admiration as she herself inspired. Mrs. Wentworth was tall, and very finely formed ; an advantage fully as conspicuous now, as when, twenty-five years before, at the age of eighteen, she had given herself and her fifty thousand pounds to a man as handsome and much richer than herself. Her features were large, noble, and perfectly regular, their only defect being the facility with which they gave expression to every feeling of pride or displeasure that arose within her. Her voice was peculiar ; and, had she been an actress, would have been invaluable, being singularly deep and clear ; while, instead of raising it when moved by strong emotion, she suffered it to fall almost to a whisper, but such a whisper as might have found its way to the ears of the gods had she addressed them from the farthest depth of the opera-stage. Her dress was admirably suited to her appearance, displaying that species of taste which is founded on good sense. Rich, elegant, plain, and exquisitely fitted to her person, her robe and its appurtenances were such as might have been worn with propriety by a woman of twice her age and twice her size ; the head-dress alone was *à prétention*, being a light hat of white crape, ornamented with a plume of feathers ; which, being placed at the back of a finely-formed head, whose raven tresses, arranged in rich bands, were bound with magnificent pearls, certainly suggested no idea of age ; but was equally far from being in any degree too juvenile in style for its graceful wearer.

A very young eye is easily caught, and a very young heart is apt to follow it ; so that, partly from the effect of admiration, and partly from gratitude for the unexpected graciousness of the lady's demeanour to herself, Isabella was ready, before the visit ended, to declare that Mrs. Wentworth was the most beautiful, the most elegant, and the most amiable person in the world.

It can hardly be wondered at that, in an hour of such deep personal emotion, Isabella neither reasoned upon, nor, in truth, perceived the want of courtesy displayed towards her family by the marked manner in which all Mrs. Wentworth's attention



was exclusively fixed upon herself; but an observant looker-on could hardly have failed of reading aright the feelings and the purpose of this haughty dame.

When first made acquainted with her only child's intended marriage with a girl who had neither birth nor fortune to recommend her, the agony of indignation into which she fell would have been terrible to behold; but no one did behold it. She sat alone, with her son's letter crushed in her hand, her eyes fixed, and her temples throbbing, till the conscious violence of her passion terrified herself; and then, by an effort, of which, perhaps, one person in five thousand may be capable, she calmed the storm that raged within her, and steadfastly and quietly settled all the powers of her mind upon the examination of the possibilities still existing that this hateful marriage might be prevented.

She knew her son well, and was quite aware that her power over him, great to a certain point, ended there, and would be vainly stretched did she make any attempt to pass it. He held her sovereign in knowledge, taste, and judgment on nearly every subject comprehended under the general title of human affairs; and so highly did he appreciate and reverence her wisdom and tact in such matters, that the knowing her to be totally without any literary taste or attainment whatever, though this was far from being his own case, was never considered by him as a defect, but merely as a peculiarity in her.

Mrs. Wentworth well knew in what reverence her judgment upon all the realities of life was held by her son; but she equally well knew that his own will, when once fixed, was held by him in greater reverence still. Her only hope, therefore, rested on the possibility that this immovable will was not yet fixed; and that the feeling which he spoke of in his letter as "the strong attachment he had formed," might, in truth, be only such a glow of admiration for the pretty bloom of some rural beauty as might be made to fade and pass away under the influence of such satire and such arguments as she well knew how to use.

The experiment was tried, and very skilfully; but its result changed the tactics of the able mother from opposition to affectionate acquiescence, and an offer, immediately accepted, of coming to Oak Park for the purpose of being introduced to the young beauty who had been happy enough so effectually to engage his affections.

A very interesting game still remained on the cards for her. Marmaduke would marry the country parson's daughter. Of that she had no longer any doubt; but the country parson's daughter might live the slave of her will, and might become an

agent, rather than a hinderance, in continuing the subjection of her son to her judgment and her management on all those points which her education and her nature taught her to consider as of the greatest moment in life.

A mere spectator might not indeed have been able to read all the depth of purpose which gave birth to the endearing graciousness of Mrs. Wentworth's manner; but he might have seen, had he looked shrewdly, that she was fixedly bent upon enchanting and winning the young girl's love, and he might have seen also that her efforts were crowned with the most complete success.

The other members of the company might perhaps have found their share in the honours of the day but meagre, had not Mr. Wentworth himself been so greatly delighted by the effect his beloved appeared to have produced on his mother as to make him much more conversable and generally agreeable than they had ever seen him before. The only persons invited to meet the Worthington family were Mr. Roberts and his son; the father being the vicar of the parish and the son a gentlemanlike undergraduate of Oxford. So, by the help of engravings, and the high spirits of their host, the evening wore away tolerably well, and the carriage was announced before Mrs. Worthington and Margaret had been longing for and expecting it above half an hour.

When the moment of departure arrived, Mrs. Worthington, whose manners were very quiet and lady-like, ventured to act upon the resolution taken and decided upon between herself and her husband before they left home,—that is to say, she expressed to Mrs. Wentworth their hope that she would do them the honour of dining at Abbot's Preston on the following Tuesday. It was then that even the captivated Isabella felt there was pride as well as grace in the deportment of her splendid mother-in-law; for it was impossible to mistake the haughty feeling which seemed to heighten her colour and her stature too, as she replied that she regretted it was out of her power to accept the invitation.

She soon, however, appeared to have overcome the movement of surprise which Mrs. Worthington's audacity had produced, for turning again to Isabella, to whom she was speaking when thus disagreeably interrupted, she said, "Let me see you repeatedly, my dear, while I am here. I shall remain for one week longer. Your mother can bring you to me. Good-night. A bow sufficed for her farewell greeting to the rest, and so they parted.

The first voice that made itself heard after the carriage drove off was that of Margaret.

"God grant, my dearest, dearest Isabella," she exclaimed, "that you may not often have to endure the presence of that most odious woman! Never did I see till this day anything deserving the name of insolence. I do not believe she exchanged a single word either with my mother or my father."

"We must forgive her, Margaret," said Mr. Worthington, "for having neither eyes nor ears for any one but her future daughter,—and I for one feel well inclined to be indulgent on this score; because it was evident that the examination of Isabella, which prevented her taking notice of any one else, was productive of every feeling towards her which we could desire."

"That is quite true," said Mrs. Worthington; "and her want of common civility to me must be of very little importance compared to her manner of treating Isabella, which was certainly very flattering. Nevertheless, I am inclined to say amen to Margaret's prayer that she may not be much at Oak Park."

"And what does Isabella herself say to that prayer?" said her father.

There was perfect silence for a minute or two after this question, for they were all anxious for the answer, but it came not.

"Why do you not answer me, my love?" said Mr. Worthington.

"O, papa!" murmured poor Isabella, in a voice that showed she was weeping, "what can I say? I am very, very unhappy! What is Mrs. Wentworth to me compared to my own dear mother? And if she has been rude to mamma, how can I value her kindness to me?"

"We will not call it rudeness, my dear child; we will not even think it so, my Isabella," replied her mother gaily; "and Margaret shall do penance for her uncharitable interpretation, by hearing me declare that I think the object of her tirade one of the most beautiful persons I ever saw in my life; and really and truly I think we are vastly wrong to quarrel with her for making all the use she could of this visit for the purpose of discovering what sort of a daughter her only son was about to give her. The interview was an important one to her, as well as to you, Isabella."

"Thank you! Bless you! my dear, dear mother!" cried Isabella, eagerly. "It must have been that. I know she did not behave as she would have done under any other circumstances; she was only thinking of Marmaduke; and considering that he is her only child, can we wonder at her anxiety? Don't you feel this, dear Margaret. Cannot you forgive her on this account, as papa and mamma so kindly do?"

"Can you forgive me, Isabella, for my pettishness?" replied her sister; "I forgot the pain I might be giving you by such

an outbreking of ill-humour; but the truth is, I am tired, sleepy, and cross. I hate a formal dinner-party; and the only agreeable moments I enjoyed during the whole day were while the solemn-looking servants were carrying round the tea, from fancying what a very different circle it would be when you were mistress there."

"I was thinking of that, too, Margaret," said Mrs. Worthington, laughing; "and to be sure anything less alike than our light-hearted, gleesome Isabella, and the magnificent mamma of her *futur*, can hardly be imagined. But as his having so stiff and stately a mother was not a matter of choice, and as the taking so gay a little wife certainly is, I think there is room to believe that Mr. Wentworth prefers the agreeable to the sublime in his companions when the power of selection is left him."

"And in that case, who is there," replied Isabella, "whom he will so dearly love to welcome as all of you? Don't be affronted, papa, that I will not allow you to be sublime; but neither you nor mamma have ever let us see you under any aspect that forbade us to love you beyond all other things in the world."

"Well, then, for the sake of your love, I will wave my claim to sublimity! But I must remark upon one trait in Wentworth that pleased me greatly; it showed his heart to be in the right place, I think; I mean his obvious delight at perceiving how greatly his mother seemed pleased with Isabella. The invitation to meet her, shows that all opposition on her part, if there ever were any, is withdrawn; and therefore, his evident pleasure arose not from a mere feeling of satisfaction at settling the matter easily, but from one that does him much more honour; namely, a dutiful and affectionate wish that the two beings he best loves should become naturally dear to each other."

"Yes, I saw that," said the happy Isabella; "I saw all the time that his eye was upon us, and that he was greatly pleased."

"And what did you contrive to say to the lady, Isabella, so quickly and so decidedly to win her approval?" said Mr. Worthington. "Did she talk to you of books, and elicit your feelings and opinions upon any particular style of literature?"

Isabella blushed a little, though seen by none, as she recollected how little she had uttered in reply to Mrs. Wentworth's categories, deserving the approval of which her father spoke. Yet she felt a little modest confidence, too, in the possibility of her doing better, had Mrs. Wentworth's questions *chanced* to have turned on such subjects as her father named; instead of being, as in truth they were, though Isabella guessed it not, a series of experiments upon her phrases and accents, the elegant

Mrs. Wentworth being as nice in such matters as in the texture of her laces and lawns.

After the interval of a moment, Isabella answered very frankly,—

“Oh! no, papa; nothing of the kind. Perhaps such things may grow between us if I continue to advance in favour; but to-day I believe my part of the conversation consisted chiefly in no and yes; and if she was pleased with me, I think it could only have been because she found out that I was so greatly delighted with her.”

“And you *were* delighted with her, Isabella, were you not?” said her father.

“How could I be otherwise, papa?” she replied. “You know how greatly I dreaded the introduction, and to find all the frowns I anticipated turned into smiles could not fail to gladden my heart, could it?”

“No, certainly, my dear child. And here we are at home, none of us sorry, I dare say, that the day is over.”

To this there was no dissentient voice. An affectionate good-night followed, and the parties separated.

Margaret and Isabella shared one room, and of course they chatted together as they laid their dresses aside; but though the conversation was cheerful on both sides, and mingled with caresses on the part of the still repentant Margaret, it was not as confidential and unrestrained as usual. Despite her sorrow for having so freely expressed her judgment, she could not change it; the image of her mother seated in a distant chair, turning over endless volumes of engravings, while Isabella and Mrs. Wentworth sat enthroned, as her anger called it, on the sofa, still rested on her fancy; and the best she could do towards atoning for the frankness which had drawn her sister's tears, was to avoid all allusion to the subject, and speak of nothing but the splendour which had surrounded them; a theme which perhaps had in it as much of consolation to the really wounded feelings of both, as any other that she could have fixed upon. But though there was enough of this to furnish material for many an eloquent discussion, they did not talk long. Perhaps they had both of them too much to think of, on subjects more interesting still, and that could not conveniently be made common stock; so, whether the fair creatures slept or waked, the chamber was very soon hushed in perfect silence.

Meanwhile, the curtain colloquy between the father and mother went on with much less reserve, for when *tête à tête*, neither of them scrupled to confess to the other the great dislike with which Mrs. Wentworth had inspired them. Both agreed in thinking her haughty, imperious, and self-willed; but happily

both agreed also in thinking that it signified very little. She had never been much at the house of her son since the young man came of age, though whenever she had appeared there, it was as its mistress; and it certainly did not seem very likely that a lady of the character they gave her credit for should find any additional attraction at Oak Park, when she should be mistress there no longer. This logic was so perfectly satisfactory to them both, that they soon quitted the subject; and, like their fair daughters, amused themselves by recalling the splendour of all they had seen.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

NOTHING whatever occurred, in consequence of Mrs. Wentworth's arrival at Oak Park, either to change or impede the course of events that were rapidly bringing on its master's wedding-day. The fitting up and furnishing Isabella's exquisite boudoir was completed; her love of music being proudly cherished by her observant lover (who knew, however, no more of the science than his hunters), the second drawing-room was fitted up with grand piano, harp, and music-desks, as if the young bride's almost untutored ballad-singing could be converted thereby into the performance of a Grisi. Her own horse, and her own groom's own horse, and her own chariot, and her own phaeton, and her own footman, and her own flower-garden, and last, though not least, her own settlement, were at length all complete, and the wedding-day arrived, gay in sunshine, flowers, and bell-ringing. Mrs. Wentworth left the country about a week before the ceremony; being, as she said, quite unable to be absent longer from business which demanded her personal attention at her Richmond villa; but she embraced her future daughter-in-law, and, moreover, left in her hands, as she bade her adieu, a casket, containing a very handsome set of emerald ornaments. It would have been captious, after this, perhaps, to remember that she had never once, during her fortnight's visit at Oak Park, honoured the rectory of Abbot's Preston by permitting her equipage to stop at its gates, even for the ceremony of dropping, a visiting card; and, accordingly, the circumstance was hardly remembered by Isabella, and was commented upon by no one. Nevertheless, there were two, at least, of the family who could not quite forget it; these were Colonel Seaton and Margaret; but not even to each other was any observation ever uttered on the subject.

Mr. Wentworth particularly requested that the wedding

might be a very private one, and even hinted that a special license in the rectory drawing-room would be greatly preferable to walking across the lawn and churchyard to the village church; but on this point Mr. Worthington was firm. He would not perform the ceremony himself—this was done by Mr. Roberts; but he gave his lovely daughter away. By dint of some of her sweetest smiles, Isabella obtained leave for her two aunts to be present, but it was upon condition, gaily stated, however, that she should suffer one, or both, to perform the service of bride-maids; in order, as he said, to avoid the *désagrément* of having his attention called from her, while, even for an instant, he might feel himself compelled to notice any young ladies of the neighbourhood, whom she might otherwise select for the purpose. To this Isabella laughingly, but readily, assented; and her well-beloved aunt Lucy, much to her own surprise, but still more to her satisfaction, was invited to share with Margaret the youthful office.

Miss Christina heard of this appointment with great approbation. It had ever been her habit to look upon her sister Lucy as a young creature just emerging from childhood; and as she was really as fond of her as she could be of anything that bore no obvious relation to the great questions of political economy, it rejoiced her to see the “dear girl,” as she called her, placed exactly on the footing she ought to hold with her young nieces.

On the day before the ceremony, Miss Christina, in a message conveyed by her sister Lucy, expressed a wish to be present at Isabella’s toilet on the following morning, observing that the poor child had been so incessantly occupied by Mr. Wentworth during the short courtship, that she had never yet been able to find any opportunity of explaining to her some ideas and principles upon the conduct of women in the married state, which it was highly important for her to hear. There was, moreover, another subject which Miss Christina thought it right to mention before the ceremony took place, in order that her niece might direct her earliest attention afterwards to its proper and efficient arrangement. This was concerning her own future access to the fine library at Oak Park. It was not, indeed, that she took any particular interest in such a collection of miscellaneous literature as was probably to be found there, but she doubted not there must be many volumes amongst its treasures to which useful reference might be made; and moreover, she entertained very sanguine hopes, from the circumstance of Mr. Wentworth being in Parliament, that he might, if she could once interest him sufficiently in the business, be the means of bringing her plan of female co-operation before the great council of the nation.

Nothing, she thought, could so effectually tend to promote this object, as the passing many of her studious hours with Mr. Wentworth in his library, and her intention was to request from Isabella a key of any of the cases that might be locked, together with a general permission, made known to every servant in the establishment, for her coming and going to and from the room at all hours, unchecked and unchallenged in any way. A few words to Isabella would, she felt certain, be quite sufficient to settle this matter to her satisfaction, and it was during the time (unnecessarily long, she doubted not) which would be devoted to the toilet on her wedding-day that she determined to speak them.

Her request to be present at this preliminary and very important part of the day's ceremonies, to which neither Mrs. Worthington, Lucy, Margaret, nor even the bride herself, found courage to object, was, however, positively and effectually set aside by the omnipotent Hannah, who, the moment she heard of it, pronounced her veto without a shadow of ceremonious softening.

"If Miss Christina is to help at the dressing, my dears, you must do without me. She loves laying down the law overmuch to be bearable at such a time. Don't I know her, Miss Lucy? And wont she be going on all the while with such talk as no mortal under King Solomon could make head or tail of? Asking every minute '*Do you understand me, Isabella?*' or, '*Shall I go over it again?*' And how is the dear child to sit steady and keep her head still, while I am putting on Mrs. Wentworth's beautiful Brussels veil and the orange-flowers, if she has got to fidget and answer '*Yes, aunt,*' every minute?"

"That is all very true, Hannah," replied Mrs. Worthington, considerably inclined to laugh—for it was a settled thing throughout the family that nothing Hannah said should ever be taken as an offence—"that is all very true, but what can we say to my sister? It will appear very harsh, Isabella, will it not, to tell her that she is the only female of the family who must be excluded?"

"I would not say so for the whole world, mamma!" replied Isabella; "so you must manage the veil as well as you can, Hannah, and I will promise to sit as still as I can, for most certainly aunt Christina must come if she likes it."

"May I step over to Appleton this evening, and just speak to her myself?" said Hannah.

"Let her do that, sister Worthington," said Lucy pleadingly, who in her heart dreaded her sister's presence quite as much as the old waiting-woman. "Nobody is ever offended, you know, at what Hannah says."

"I will let her go," said Mrs. Worthington, "if she will promise to say nothing as a message from us, but put the thing upon the footing of one of her own whims. Aunt Christina



knows, as well as the rest of us, how completely we have spoiled her."

"O yes, that she does," replied Hannah very gravely, "and I will say no single word that shall make her think it is anything else." And on these conditions the nuncio set forth.

"The car is to come here for you, Miss Christy, at half-past nine precisely. Miss Lucy sleeps with us, because I must do her hair," said Hannah, as soon as she entered the presence of Miss Clark.

"And were you sent with this message by way of answer to what I told my sister Lucy to say this morning?" said the political economist with sudden anger.

"Message, Miss Christy? God bless you! I bring no message at all. There isn't one of them in a state to send a message, or to hear one either. Everything is made over to me; and well it is for them that they had presence of mind enough to think of doing it, for it is doubtful whether there would have been any marriage at all if they had not."

"Then what do you mean by talking of sending the car for me at half-past nine, Hannah? That would give but just time enough for me to get to the church, and I told Lucy to say that I wished to be with Isabella while she is dressing. I have a great deal to say to her."

"I can't help it, Miss Christina. You may easily find some other time for saying it, seeing that there will be but two miles between you after Miss Isabella gets home."

"But I tell you I choose to be present at——"

"Beg your pardon, Miss Christina, but I can't stop now; for I've got lots of things to get out of Miss Lucy's drawers," said Hannah, sturdily moving towards the door.

"Let the car be here at half-past seven, Hannah, do you hear?" screamed Miss Clark.

"Half-past nine to a minute, Miss Christina," replied the impracticable favourite; and though the authoress actually quitted her desk and followed her up stairs for the purpose of reiterating her commands while Miss Lucy's commissions were executed, she advanced not an inch towards her own will thereby, receiving for answer nothing more satisfactory than such running mutterings as—

"Where in the versal world has Miss Lucy been after packing her white cornelians? Well! its no bad thing, I take it, to have an old fool like me to slave and to sweat body and soul too. I should like to know where's the t'other lady's maid as would carry all these things through the fields for two miles; eh, Miss Christy? But missis knows what I am, I'll say that for her: and so does Mrs. Wentworth that is to be, too; and if they

didn't, I should not have the management of all that's to be to-morrow; and if I hadn't, the breakfast might be ready by about twelve at night, I expect. But God bless you! Miss Christy, don't keep on so, or I shall be taking Miss Lucy's flannel petticoat instead of her lace scarf: and don't ye now bother yourself about the car coming this time or that time, but just be pleased to remember that our Richard Pervis, though as good a fellow as any in the parish, can't cut himself up into as many men as Miss Isabella will have to wait upon her the day after to-morrow. You shan't be forgotten, Miss Christy, trust to me for that; and the parson shall stand still with the book in his hand, if needs must, till you and Richard Pervis are by. Good-night, Miss Christy. Don't trouble yourself about nothing more. I'll be sure to take care as all's right." And so the old woman bustled off, having very faithfully executed her commission; for not only did she leave the political economist persuaded that none of her relations were guilty of frustrating her plans, but with feelings towards them nearly approaching to the tenderness of pity, for the annoyance they must endure from having put themselves in the power of so stupid and impertinent a domestic.

The bridal day, as we have said, was one of cloudless sunshine; and never did that glorious favour of Heaven fall upon a fairer head than that of the young bride. Lovely in the tears she shed as she gave her parting kisses, and lovelier in the smiles with which she listened to her bridegroom's tender "Come, my love!" as at length he drew her from the rustic porch of her father's parsonage, to place her in the splendid travelling-carriage which, with his four prancing greys, waited to take her the first stage towards Dover on her way to France.

The smart waiting-maid and stylish valet mounted behind; the tiny postilions, with their orange-coloured satin jackets, large nosegays, and white favours, cracked their whips; the well-bitted steeds made one pretty prancing movement with their fore-feet, and trotted off; while father, mother, sister, and aunts stood looking on, and dashed away the tears that dimmed their eyes, that they might more clearly see the handsome equipage that bore away the darling of their hearts.

Colonel Seaton had not been present at the wedding, nor did he witness the departure; a fit of the gout, he said, threatened him, which rendered it more prudent for him to lie in bed: and if the old man shed more sorrowful tears than all the rest, when Isabella gave him her parting kiss, he turned upon his pillow and no one perceived it.

That prettiest of engraved thoughts, "The Bridemaid," may give a very accurate idea of poor Margaret's aspect and attitude, when she returned to the chamber she had so long shared with

her sister. She had carefully shut herself into it, and a copious flood of comfortable, feminine, unchecked tears effectually relieved her swelling heart. This over, she sat long in meditation, and so intently, that she seemed to forget her present position, in the vivid picture her imagination drew of the future. For had not her new brother two livings in his gift? and had she not heard that both incumbents were old? and was it possible to doubt that Mr. Cumyn's curate, the Frederic Norris of whose eyes and teeth Isabella had confessed herself so strangely ignorant,—was it possible to doubt that Frederic Norris loved her? and was it not clear that, were he now to take courage and tell her father so, no reasonable objection could be made to her accepting him? All these important queries having received the most satisfactory answers, the imp Fancy danced afield, farther and farther still, till the bridemaïd saw herself the mistress of the venerable Mr. Robert's pretty parsonage, with a bay-window added to the drawing-room, part of the rich glebe in front of the house turned into a lawn and shrubberies after the manner of Abbot's Preston, herself and Isabella the nearest and dearest of neighbours, and their beautiful children playing together, and chasing each other through the wicket gate, which, of course, would be made between the grounds of the park and the parsonage.

It was exactly at the moment when she had reached this part of her vision, that a knocking at the door roused her, and she could hardly have blushed a more "celestial rosy red," had she been discovered *tête à tête* with the hero of it, than now glowed on her cheek, as she rose to obey the summons.

It was her mother, who came to look for her, and who perceiving, spite of the smile that welcomed her, strong traces of emotion in the pretty bridemaïd's countenance, scolded her, though tenderly, and with some sympathetic feeling, for dwelling on the more painful part of the morning's history.

"You should follow our example in the drawing-room, dear Margaret!" said Mrs. Worthington, taking her arm and leading her away. "We have all been trying to outvie each other in our prognostications of the happiness this fortunate marriage is likely to bring us; while you, naughty girl! have been thinking only of what we have lost."

"No, indeed, mamma!" replied the conscious Margaret, blushing more deeply than before; "that would be very ungrateful and very wrong. I am very, very glad our dear Isabella is married!"

## CHAPTER IX

GAILY whirled along the bridal chariot, and gaily too danced the bark that bore the happy pair from England to France ; nay, tedious as the long interval generally appears which must be traversed before the pleasure-hunting traveller can reach Paris, it appeared not tedious to Mr. Wentworth and his lovely bride.

How could such a journey seem tedious ?

Almost from the first hour that the early-fatherless Marmaduke Wentworth learned to understand the splendid independence of his own position, he had determined to grace it by selecting for his bride the very loveliest lady he could find. Long before he left Eton, he became aware of the embarrassing fact that very nearly every mother he should meet, who had a daughter to marry, would be sure to lay a cunning snare to catch him ; and manfully did he protest against becoming the prey of such manœuvres.

"No !—never will I be so caught !" he had been heard to say to all sufficiently familiar to converse on such a theme with him,—"never ! No old woman—nay, nor any young one either—shall pick me out to be her banker and *maître d'hôtel*. I shall marry—

‘For what’s a table richly spread,  
Without a woman at its head.’

most certainly I shall marry, for an establishment is wretchedly incomplete unless a beautiful woman presides over it. But I must choose, and not be chosen ; and if I choose not well, let my reputation answer it."

For two years the fairest ladies in England passed in review before him, and more than once he seemed inclined to believe that he had found the jewel he was in search of ; but, upon one occasion, the half-chosen beauty laughed the tenth of an inch too heartily, and he perceived that the double row of pearls, which contrasted so beautifully with her coral lips, had lost a bead ! On another, a saucy breeze upon the pier at Brighton, sporting too rudely with light drapery, blew out a flame, from which he had begun to feel some gentle warmth, by exposing an ankle-bone a thought too angular ; and on a third, the very promising result of a critical examination, many times repeated, was sud-

denly blighted by the injudicious earnestness of his mother's approbation.

"She will make every one believe that it is she who has chosen my wife for me!" he exclaimed, after a *tête-à-tête* breakfast, during which Mrs. Wentworth had ventured to allude to his attentions to Lady Mary ——; and, within twenty-four hours, he had set off on a tour through Normandy.

It was at a county ball—the first at which she had ever appeared—that Mr. Wentworth first saw Isabella Worthington; and his judgment immediately pronounced her to be the loveliest girl he had yet seen.

Lovely she certainly was, and in no common degree; but the electrical suddenness of the effect she produced on him was probably owing, in part at least, to the circumstances under which he saw her. Where, in the crowded drawing-rooms of London, could he ever have beheld such freshness of pleasure sparkling in a radiant eye?—where such unstudied, unconscious, thoughtless grace and charm of movement as the happy girl displayed in dancing? Did ever chestnut curls fall with such easy elegance?—did ever dimpled smile display such teeth, such lips, such hilarity? His recollections of other beauties had something so tame and faded when compared to her, that in a wonderfully short space of time, after his first introduction, he decided that, beyond the possibility of doubt, she was exactly the being of whom he was in search. He promptly decided that her deficiency in point of fortune, and the undistinguished position of her family, were objections of absolutely no importance when compared to the inestimable advantage of having found a creature so perfect in beauty, and so fresh in blooming girlhood,—who, by the singular elegance of her form and movements, was exempt from every trace of the awkwardness which so often obscures the graces of very early youth. Nor did his judgment on these points ever vary; through the whole period of his courtship he was continually discovering new cause to congratulate himself on the fortunate chances which had kept him from forming any other connection, and led him at last free and unfettered into the presence of the peerless Isabella. Pygmalion could hardly be prouder of his skilful work than Mr. Wentworth of his judicious choice; and he was still far too intent upon this happy theme for either the length or the dulness of the road between Calais and Paris to appear evils to him.

And why was Isabella so happy? Did she, too, discover, almost at every glance, some new charm that made her glory in her bridegroom? No; it was not so that the happy spirit worked within her. She knew he was very handsome, and she rejoiced at it, because she thought that everybody must

like him the better for it as well as herself; but it was not the remembrance of this that made the road to Paris seem short and pleasant to her. It was the delight of believing that she was beloved; it was the sweet sensation of warm and tender gratitude to the companion whose love had surrounded her with so many joy-creating circumstances; it was the thought of the happiness she should take back to the dear home she had left, when she returned to tell them of the wonders she had seen, and all the delight she had felt—it was this that made *her* endure the toilsome way so cheerfully.

But Paris was reached at last, and its whirligig of brilliant dissipation received them into its vortex, both still gay, happy, animated, and equally disposed to enjoy the amusements which seemed to welcome them on all sides. Whoever had looked in upon them the morning after their arrival, while sitting in their gay saloon, radiant with mirrors and *or molu*, might have thought, as they sipped their fragrant coffee, and exchanged their youthful smiles, that no one could “desire better sympathy.” Both looked happy, and both were so; yet this pretty “union in division” was but lip deep; the smile of each spoke full contentment; but the source of it differed as widely as the bright light of summer sunrise differs from the streaming blaze of gaslight.

The room they occupied commanded a wide view of the Tuileries gardens: and, as the morning was already far advanced, a hundred picturesque groups, in the delightful variety of costume so perfectly new and so agreeably striking to untravelled English eyes, peopled the noble expanse in all directions. The *jets d'eau* danced in the sunshine—orange-trees and oleanders looked strangely beautiful—an acre of mignonette sent up its fragrance, and even the humble *marguerites*, powerful in their unnumbered multitudes, lent such a rainbow brilliance to the enclosures, that Isabella, dazzled out of all power of discrimination, thought the flowers of France a thousand times more lovely than all the choice horticultural treasures she had left behind.

“Oh! it is fairy-land, Marmaduke!” she exclaimed, forgetting her breakfast to gaze upon the lively scene. “You have been here before, and seem to look upon it quite philosophically; but to me it has positively the effect of enchantment. How dearly kind of you to bring me here! But say, dearest, will you have more coffee? Do not let us waste our precious time. I long to be walking among all those gay-looking people. Shall I put on my bonnet, that we may set off directly?”

“And so give the *soubrettes*, the *bonnes*, and the babies the first view of my charming bride?” replied, Mr. Wentworth,

gallantly kissing her hand. "No, Isabella, that must not be. Our first duty" (ringing the bell as he spoke) "is to send our cards to the embassy; and then, while you continue to amuse yourself with the *toques*, the *sabots*, and the *china-astres*, I will run to the opera-house, and see if anything can be done in the way of getting a box for to-night. I should like to show you there first, I think, as well as anywhere. But you must be exceedingly careful, my love, about your dress; and, indeed, if I succeed in securing a box from which we can be decently visible, I must order the carriage to take you to Madame B——'s for the *coiffure*, and all the needful *etceteras* of the opera toilet."

"Nay, dearest Marmaduke!—surely that cannot be necessary. The imperial, and I know not how many boxes besides, are filled with all sorts of pretty things. And as to the *coiffure*, may I not have my hair dressed as usual?"

Something in the least degree in the world approaching to a frown passed over the handsome countenance of Mr. Wentworth, and an ear more critically awake than Isabella's might perhaps have found something a little peremptory in the tone with which he replied,—

"Quite out of the question, Isabella. I beg your pardon, my love, but, beautiful as you are, you must condescend to put yourself implicitly into the hands of Madame B——, or some other *modiste* of equal authority. Nobody can admire your lovely hair more than I do; but a married woman at the Grand Opera might as well appear in a grenadier's cap, I believe, as her own hair. And as to the contents of the imperial—I hope—I am sure—that you have everything nice and proper about you, but the idea of your appearing in anything like English style at the Académie Royale would, I must confess, mortify me very sensibly. However, there is no danger of this, I trust?"

"There is no danger, depend upon it, dear Marmaduke, of my doing anything you don't like. But make haste about this opera-box. I long to leave this room, beautiful as it is; but that is betraying very child-like impatience, is it not? So I will sit at this delightful open window, and look out upon King Philip's paradise."

"No, my love, you positively must not do that! I certainly did not bring you to Paris to show you out of the open window of an hotel to all passers by. You can sit on this sofa in perfect safety, and may see a great deal from thence of the trees and the people, and all the rest of it, but you really must promise me not to look out of the open window."

"Must I?" said Isabella, laughing, and blushing a little as she felt that her childish curiosity had drawn upon her what

sounded very like a rebuke. "Then I will, dear Marmaduke, —I will promise that no eye from without shall penetrate the secret of my existence till you return again;" and so saying, she playfully ensconced herself in a corner of the sofa he had indicated.

There was one peculiarity of character which Mr. Wentworth shared with many other very estimable individuals: he detested every approach, however distant or delicate, to a joke. Of this Isabella was as yet perfectly unconscious, and very naturally so; for, though she was his wife, her acquaintance with Mr. Wentworth had been but short, and in a courtship so very much in earnest as that which won her, there is no occasion, and, in truth, very little opportunity for any joking at all; so that, although she was decidedly a very laughter-loving young mortal, no indications of this marked difference between them had, as yet, been made visible.

It was hardly a frown, it was a general darkening of countenance in the bridegroom, that followed these words of his bride; but the gay girl saw it not; and though he instantly left the room without uttering any adieu, she understood from it nothing but kind zeal to execute, as quickly as possible, the commission that had for its sole object, the obtaining for her a pleasure she was very anxious to enjoy.

For the first five minutes she amused herself well enough in contemplating the apartment she was in, with all its multitude of variations from everything English, and she peeped, too, as far as her promise would let her, at the gay scene beyond; but as this part of her occupation was, from her position, rather tantalizing, she rang the bell, dismissed the breakfast, summoned her maid, ordered her writing-desk, and was presently wholly absorbed in writing to her mother. How glibly ran her ready pen over the sheet! How small was the character in which she wrote, lest even Lord G——'s bag might not have room to hold all the million of things she wished to say! There were all her travelling adventures to be related, and all her exceeding admiration of almost everything she had seen; for when a very young heart is very happy, it is apt to act like a glass of rose-colour upon the fancy and the judgment, making all things look bright and beautiful: so Mrs. Wentworth assured her mother that the route from Calais to Paris was full of interest. And then there was the wonderful animation and gay noisiness of Paris itself, the splendour of the hotel, and the brilliant spectacle of the Tuileries gardens, as seen from its windows. All this occupied her rapid fingers for four long pages of full-sized post paper; and, had Mr. Wentworth returned at that moment, she would have contentedly signed herself her correspondent's ever



affecticnate and most happy daughter : but, as nearly another hour elapsed before he appeared, another sheet was taken, and as rapidly filled as the first ; in this, however, Paris was dismissed from her thoughts, and all foreign wonders forgotten, while she expatiated on the delight she should feel when she had left all this behind, and returned amongst them again. If her first theme was a copious one, this seemed a hundred times more so ; for she painted in glowing colours the delight of having them all around her at Oak Park. Not a single individual of the race was forgotten in her affectionate imaginings concerning all the various things she should be able to do to please everybody,—and this second long sheet was written still more rapidly, and with a warmer glow of happiness at the heart, than the first.

It was just completed, when her husband reappeared : the first closely scribbled folio lying open before her, and the second, equally well covered, beneath her hand.

“When could you have found time to write this immense quantity, Isabella ?” said he, fixing his eyes with unfeigned astonishment upon the copious manuscripts spread out upon the table. “I have never seen you write a line.”

“Do you think I could write, Marmaduke, even to my own dear mamma, while you were with me ? But when I had you no longer beside me, it was a great delight to remember that I had pens and paper, that I might make those at home share in my exceeding happiness.”

“You do not mean to say, Isabella, that you have written all these pages since I left you ?”

“Yes, indeed, I do,” she replied, laughing ; “and, had you not returned, I should have written as much more, I dare say, before it had entered my head to say, ‘Hold ! enough !’”

Mr. Wentworth would have given fifty pounds, and very gladly, too, could he have known whether Isabella had amused the family at Abbot’s Preston, by relating to them her joke about letting nobody “penetrate the secret of her existence,” while he was absent. This, however, was impossible. There was nothing on which Mr. Wentworth so greatly piqued himself, as being, at all times, and under all circumstances, most completely “*the gentleman*.” Had not his grandfather made the “large Wentworth property” in trade, it is probable that so very frequent a recurrence to his own claim upon this graceful pre-eminence among his fellow-men would not have been made ; as it was, however, his right to it, and the means by which this right was to be made manifest to all who approached him, was rarely, or never out of his thoughts. To ask to read his wife’s first letter to her family, was clearly impossible : while, on the other hand, Isabella, from a feeling of most unfeigned

humility, would have deemed herself very presumptuous, had she, for a moment, conceived the idea of offering her idle gossip for his perusal. "Marmaduke is so very clever!"—"Mr. Wentworth is so very superior a person!" were phrases by which she had accustomed herself to relieve, as it were, the fulness of her heart upon the subject of his prodigious superiority to her in all ways, and this with so much sincerity, that, even if writing to himself, she must have checked the easy flow of her pen, lest it might betray her into what his "very superior mind" might think folly.

All, therefore, that passed further on the subject of the long letter was her asking him, as she hastened to fold and enclose it, if he would have the kindness to despatch it in proper form to the embassy.

"And what have you been able to achieve, dear Marmaduke, concerning the opera-box?" she added, as she put it into his hand.

"Nothing," he replied, in a tone that would have been painfully unintelligible had she not fancied that he was kindly, though beyond reason, vexed at her being disappointed.

"O Marmaduke!" she exclaimed, "do not think me so very silly a personage as to care whether I listen to this famous opera to-night or to-morrow. How *very* kind you are, my dearest husband, to think so much about my amusement."

Mr. Wentworth smiled upon his lovely wife; but he felt as conscious, poor young man! as a child who has broken a china cup and hid it away; he felt that she did not at all know what was passing within him. He struggled, however, to forget what had turned all that was sweet to bitter; he stood up, shook his handsome curls, turned to the window, drew forth his perfumed handkerchief, watched for half a moment the pretty dancing step of a Paris nursery-maid as she moved backwards to entice her waddling charge to follow her, and then faced about and once more ventured to meet the sweet eyes of Isabella.

"Yes, it is too true!" he said, with a sort of mock pathos, that suited well enough with the occasion, and with the appearance which he feared but too truly his own countenance had exhibited a few minutes before. "You have guessed rightly, my love, in thinking I am vexed at your disappointment. However, I have secured one of the best boxes in the house for to-morrow night, when the same splendid opera is to be repeated. And now, dearest, we will order the carriage and drive to Madame B——'s."

When the servant who received his orders was about to leave the room, Isabella remembered, though her husband had been happy enough to forget it, the letter, which was to be forwarded

to the embassy for transmission to England, and said, with sufficient eagerness to prove that she was greatly interested in its going. "Mr. Wentworth, had not James better carry my letter to Lord G——s before he comes round with the carriage?"

Like a gay pleasure-boat that, having made an awkward tack in the midst of its sunshiny career, loses the breeze, and with drooping sails boxing the ears of the fair company, has to struggle hard before the helm can set all right again, so had our bridegroom been overtaken by a crabbed gust, so had he struggled and was right again. But now, when the effort used to make the rough moment pass and be forgotten was rendered of no avail by this unlucky breath from the innocent lips of Isabella, he felt in his weakness as if the rudder were quite unshipped, and that, let his charming freight be terrified or not, he could no longer conceal the unpropitious trim into which he had fallen.

"What *can* your letter contain, Isabella," he said, "of such extreme importance as to render it necessary to destroy all the arrangements I have made for the morning? and that, too, only in order that it may reach the embassy so very many hours before the post goes out. Do just as you please, however. Never mind about the carriage, James. Take this letter to the English embassy; you remember where to find it, I suppose?"

The man bowed, took the unfortunate despatch, and left the room.

Isabella fixed her eyes on those of her husband, like a child who has some suspicion that his favourite hound meditates rough play, but is not yet quite frightened at it.

"O my foolish letter!" she exclaimed; "I wish it had never been written, Marmaduke; for I see that my sending it has been very disagreeable to you. Why did you let it go, dearest? You know so much better about every thing than I do, that you must promise me never to do what I ask, when you do not quite approve of it yourself."

"I have no wish to be a tyrant, Isabella," replied Mr. Wentworth, gravely. "You must use your own judgment upon all ordinary occasions, and in the station in which you are now placed, permit me to observe to you, it is of the utmost consequence that nothing should be done heedlessly and without reflection. But I must wish you good morning for the present; I have so many things to do, and so many people to see, that I cannot afford to lose this interval."

He took his hat as he spoke; and before she could find words to answer him, had left the room.

Where was now the perfect happiness that had poured itself out upon the paper, a short half-hour ago?

"Good Heaven! what have I said or done that could so vex him?" thought the startled Isabella, her cheeks tingling from the conviction that she must have exhibited some great and quite unprecedented symptom of countrified ignorance. "Perhaps ladies of fashion trust everything to their servants—to their *people*, as old Mrs. Wentworth calls them. Perhaps I ought to have thrown my packet upon the table, and trusted to the observance of all around me for its being disposed of in the best possible manner to suit my wishes and convenience; and doubtless he is now wounded to the quick at perceiving that I have the busy fussy style of doing things which belongs to beings of a lower order! Alas! alas! I *am* of a lower order—and how may all this be mended?"

With such thoughts as these, with no occupation whatever—for even *Galignani* was carried away with the breakfast—with the gay windows forbidden, and a very decided disinclination to write any more letters for the present, Isabella's first morning in Paris was not passed with much enjoyment. Had the curate of Mr. Cummyng married her sister, and with the desperate extravagance of newly wedded love, determined upon spending fifty pounds in giving his bride a trip to Paris, how differently would such hours have been employed! How joyously would they have descended the stairs from their *second* or *troisième*, in some obscure hotel—how blithely would they have wandered awhile with light hearts and eager eyes, through flowery labyrinths and triumphal arches on their way to the immortal Louvre—how fondly would they have congratulated each other upon being there together—in one word, how supremely happy would they have been! And yet they were not more enamoured of each other than were Isabella and her wealthy spouse. But Frederic Norris was one of the sweetest-tempered men in the world. Isabella sat for at least half an hour very gravely pondering the difficulties attending an ignorant little girl like herself, when suddenly placed in the situation of a lady of fashion; and very meekly did she determine to study and imitate the ways of all the fine people she might be happy enough to meet with. While thus she meditated, she twisted round and round her beautiful bracelet, and looked down for a moment or two upon the soft rich folds of her lavender satin dress, and almost squinted that she might see the delicate embroidery of the collar that fell over it; but all would not do, her very heart and soul seemed to fall into a dozing condition, and after a short and ineffectual struggle, she stretched her feet upon the sofa, made a pillow of her arm, and the next moment was fast asleep.

## CHAPTER X.

AND did Mr. Wentworth, the gentlemanlike, the dignified, the wealthy Mr. Wentworth, happy in his love, happy in youth, health, and a powerful understanding—did he on quitting the presence of his offending wife use his recovered leisure in the manner he intimated to her? Did he seek any of the elegant friends whom he knew to be in Paris? Or did he employ the interval in executing the business he talked of?

After rapidly descending the stairs, he paused for a moment on the steps of the hotel to decide in which direction he should turn when he quitted it; and this moment brought to his side a bowing and white-napkined official, requesting to know his pleasure respecting the important matter of dinner.

This was not a question to be totally neglected, even at that moment of distorted feeling; and Wentworth so far recovered himself as to say, "*Une table à deux couverts—un bon dîner de quatre plats et dessert—et le meilleur vin*;" but this uttered, he hastened onward with the step of one who, having bestowed all the patience he has to spare, is eager to get beyond any further call upon it.

Yet the question, and the train of ideas it suggested, did him good. It carried him forward to the hour of dinner, and to the sight of his lovely Isabella seated opposite to him; and though he was by no means distinguished for any undue attachment to the pleasures of the table, the picture his fancy presented could hardly fail of softening, in some degree, the asperity of the humour that had taken possession of him. The effect of it, however, was by no means sufficiently powerful to take him back to the presence of his wife; on the contrary, it rather made him more keenly sensible of the necessity of keeping out of her sight till he had fully recovered himself, in order that the hour he anticipated might be quite unclouded. All this would have been very well had the habits of his mind permitted him to turn aside for a moment, from the study of himself and his own feelings, to meditate a little upon what hers might be during his absence. But this did not occur to him; so he walked rapidly forward, as if by so doing he could escape the annoyance that dogged him; and passing through the gardens, across the Place de Louis Quinze, he reached the Champs Elysées, determined to

pace their remotest alleys till he felt capable of meeting the soft questionings of Isabella's eye with composure.

Of all conceivable situations, perhaps his must have been that in which ill-humour would find the greatest difficulty in maintaining its ground. By degrees he forgot, or almost forgot, the unfortunate jest which he presumed she had so fully dilated upon in her long letter; and by degrees Isabella's sweet undoubting look of love came back upon his memory. He did not feel ashamed of himself; that was totally impossible, such a state of mind being altogether incompatible with the judgment he had formed of his own qualities from the earliest moment of his sentient existence; but he felt that his love for her, and hers for him, might well excuse whatever weakness there was in the wish, which, after nearly two hours of absence he began to feel pretty strongly, of being again beside her. So, having at the last turn wandered nearly to the *Barrière de l'Etoile*, he suddenly veered about, and began to walk homewards.

There may be observed in some characters a species of inconsistency that looks as if we had a court of conscience within us, of which we were not aware. And thus Wentworth, who neither did, nor by the nature of things *could*, believe himself to have been wrong, nevertheless felt that his reappearance in the presence of his bride would be more agreeable if he brought with him something to talk about, and which might in some degree account for his absence.

Quickening his steps, therefore, he sought the box-office of the *Théâtre Français*, and by great good luck was in time to secure such places as he thought might be occupied without in any great degree compromising his dignity. This was well thought of, and was well done; yet even this did not fully satisfy the strong but unacknowledged sensation within, which told him, as if by signs and not by words, that he owed some further offering to atone for the long and dreary hours of his absence.

To obtain this, he now entered a jeweller's shop, and chose from among its glittering confusion a pair of costly bracelets. Poor Isabella! How much more valuable to her would have been such an expedition as we have imagined her sister to have taken! It was but two hours or so since she had fallen asleep in the very act of contemplating another splendid pair of bracelets, while thinking how very little she cared about them, or about anything else in the world, except pleasing her beloved and most elegant husband.

When Wentworth reached the saloon in which she had passed the miserably long morning, he found her looking pale and languid, but without a trace of resentment or ill-humour in her

sweet countenance. His entrance was indeed the greatest possible comfort to her; and though there was at the first moment a little, a very little, embarrassment in his manner, the tender air with which he substituted with his own hands the ornaments he bought for those she was previously wearing, could not fail to set her heart at rest, and convince her that however unfashionable or troublesome she might have been, she was forgiven.

Her husband certainly mistook the bright smile with which this conviction was welcomed, for a young girl's pleasure in "gauds and toys." But he had wished to please her, and she was pleased: thus all was once more right between them, and his announcement of the places taken at the theatre was *almost* as gaily received as if it had not been preceded by a long interval of joy-consuming weariness and anxiety.

A better and more effectual cure than all the jewels in Paris, for the languor left by her painful morning, was the seeing Mademoiselle Mars in the part of *Elmire*. But on this occasion, it must be confessed, her country breeding made itself so visible, that the adventures of the morning became eminently useful to her; for nothing short of Mr. Wentworth's real, though unacknowledged pain at remembering what had passed, could have enabled him to conquer his disapprobation of feelings so inartificially betrayed. Happily for the young bride, however, she perceived no symptom of this; and had she that night written another letter to her home, it would have been again filled with the warmest assurances of her felicity.

The following day all things seemed to smile upon them. Cards and an invitation came from the embassy. A fashionable friend or two, to whom he had also announced his arrival, called on him while his lovely wife, in the most becoming morning dress imaginable, was pouring out his coffee; and the effect evidently produced thereby on their critical judgments was exactly what he wished. Then he took her to the most renowned *coiffeuse* of the day, where Isabella, from a sort of feminine instinct, permitted him to squander just as much money as he chose upon articles which she neither wished for nor wanted; and, to crown all, every *lorgnette* in the opera-house was directed towards their box before she had been ten minutes exhibited in it, while she looked so unconscious, and so exquisitely beautiful, that his self-felicitations on the choice he had made became more cordial and heartfelt than ever.

In the course of the evening, Mrs. Clifton Darville, an English widow of good family, who had long made her jointure of two thousand a year do the work of five, by means of the numberless little facilities afforded to such a process in Paris,

sent to Mr. Wentworth the following words, scrawled on the back of a letter, by one of the moustached satellites who ever revolve around stars of Mrs. Clifton Darville's magnitude:—

"Have I the honour of seeing, in the charming person beside you, the Mrs. Wentworth whom the papers have just announced to us? If so, *je vous félicite, mon bon ami*, and shall beg permission to offer my homage on the earliest occasion. Have the kindness to inscribe the name of your hotel, and return it to me by the hands of my friend, Comte Fontaineau."

Nothing could have been more agreeable to Mr. Wentworth than this compliment. Mrs. Darville, amidst a thousand follies and ten thousand vanities, had preserved her reputation, and moreover had acquired the *éclat* of being the most fashionable Englishwoman in Paris. What could be so advantageous to Isabella as such a friend? For a moment he felt disposed to mark his joy and gratitude at this recognition, by accompanying the comte to the presence of the sovereign lady who had sent him; but, looking at his wife, he almost exclaimed, "And leave thy fair side all unguarded, lady?" So he contented himself by promptly and literally obeying the commands of Mrs. Darville, only adding to the address the words, "*Milles remerciemens!*" three times underscored, with which, amidst a shower of bows on both sides, he dismissed the obedient messenger.

There was no danger that on this evening Isabella should repeat the fault of the last. Fashion herself, had she been embodied and in presence there, could not have exhibited an air of less interest than that with which the little rustic listened to this *grand* performance; in truth, it wearied her, and had it not been for the scenery and the dance, she might have given her watchful companion offence by permitting a yawn or two to put her beauty out of joint. Taglioni and the orchestra together, however, saved her from this danger; and the day ended without her having perceived that she had in anything wounded the sensitiveness of her husband's elegant refinement.

We must not attempt to follow them through all the scenes of a young bride's Parisian novitiate. On the whole, Isabella, after nearly a fortnight's sojourn, would, if questioned on the subject, have been ready to declare herself very happy. And yet the countenance which she daily studied with more and more anxiety was occasionally obscured by a cloud, whose cause she was unable to explain; but she still took it for granted that it must arise from some ignorance or deficiency in herself. Watchfully, most watchfully, did she labour to discover wherein she had failed, whenever an air of cold stiffness took the place of the fond gallantry which still distinguished her husband's demeanour towards her; and thankfully would she have welcomed



any remonstrance that might have helped her to become anything and everything he wished. But nothing beyond an occasional blighting, though silent look of estrangement, had yet occurred to give her the first lesson on the instability of human happiness; and more than once, when her young heart was heavy within her she hardly knew why, she endeavoured to accuse herself of caprice and exigence, rather than conceive it possible that the man she so earnestly desired to believe perfect was out of humour without a cause.

It was not till many fine parties had been gone through, suffered, or enjoyed, according to the lights or shadows upon her Marmaduke's changeful visage, that Isabella began to lose her extreme timidity, and to find that she could bear to hear the sound of her own voice in speaking French (which she managed extremely well), without being terrified out of the power of clearly understanding the many agreeable things that were said to her in return. It was the fear of failing before her husband, infinitely more than the criticisms of any of her French acquaintance, that she dreaded; and it was principally in consequence of his having paid her some cordial compliments on her idiom and pronunciation, that she determined to take courage, and enjoy the animated conversation around her. Something, perhaps, of an almost unconscious wish to display an accomplishment of which he had thus expressed his admiration, was the real source of her courage; and for a short time this conjugal coquetry had perfect success, for each day he looked at and listened to her with more admiration than the last. But to a character like that of Wentworth, the fewer points at which those who love or live with them come in contact with their feelings the better. Perhaps personal beauty, as long as its effect lasts, may be as safe a foundation for the affection of such a one as can exist, while danger may be likely to lurk in the display of higher qualities.

Be this as it may, it was in the saloon of Madame Clifton Darville, where she was enjoying, with more than usual ease and freedom from shyness, an animated discussion on the comparative merits of Shakspeare and Voltaire, that Isabella first began to believe it possible her Marmaduke could look at her with a cold and vexed expression of countenance, even when she was not guilty of any rustic awkwardness.

Mrs. Darville, having very perfect tact in such matters, had discovered on the very first appearance of Mrs. Wentworth at one of her evening parties, that she would immediately be celebrated as the beauty *par excellence* of the hour. It therefore became to her a matter of greater importance than any one perhaps but a Mrs. Darville can understand, that she should be

visible in her saloon at the parties given there twice in every week. To effect this, the Parisian Englishwoman put forth all her powers to flatter and fascinate the beautiful strangers; and so far succeeded, that Isabella never felt so perfectly safe as when Mrs. Darville's powerful protection seemed extended over her rusticity. For some time this sort of patron and client intimacy appeared to please Mr. Wentworth exceedingly; it flattered him in many ways, and besides the agreeable feelings which such flattery could not fail to produce, he anticipated much lasting advantage from the lessons his charming wife was unconsciously receiving in *bon ton*, the only accomplishment in which he feared she might eventually prove deficient in the eyes of the world in general, or in those of his fastidious mother in particular.

Thus everything tended to make Isabella prefer Mrs. Darville's parties to all others: it was there that as a woman she first learned to use with freedom the beautiful language, which, as a child, she had thoroughly acquired from a native; and it was there also that, as Mrs. Wentworth, she first felt as much in possession of her faculties as when she was Isabella Worthington. Nor was it by any means the least reason for this partiality, that her husband nowhere appeared in such excellent spirits, nowhere appeared so perfectly well pleased with her, with himself, and with all the world, as at those very fashionable and select assemblies.

On the evening in question Isabella was seated on a sofa in a small but highly decorated apartment, which made the fourth of a splendid suite, and to which she had been led by Mrs. Darville for the purpose of seeing a miniature library, recently established there, containing the accomplished lady's especial favourites in all languages. The pulling about and admiring these little volumes led by degrees to a lively discussion of their contents; Mrs. Darville herself, Mr. Wentworth, and two distinguished Frenchmen, were at first the only speakers; but at length Isabella, in confirmation of some observation uttered by her husband, let her sweet voice be heard, and as it *was* in support of that dearly valued opinion, she spoke with energy and eloquence. The interest of the conversation seemed instantly to increase in the opinion of all within sight and hearing; the loungers from a distance closed round; a delightful war of pungent wit began, to which national feeling, perhaps, added a little keenness, but which good breeding guarded from the slightest approach to asperity.

Yet, though clever things were uttered on all sides, it was on Isabella alone, that every eye was fixed; it was to her *naïve*, unaffected, genuine feelings, that all best loved to listen; and

Voltaire, even under the protection of Frenchmen, seemed contented to be put in the shade, while England's idol shone before them in the pure light of the young beauty's criticisms.

I should greatly wrong the character of Wentworth, were I to let it be supposed, that anything approaching to the feelings of a jealous husband found way to his heart, or even to his imagination, as he watched the evident admiration which followed every look and word of Isabella. Nothing could be farther from the truth; indeed it was exactly at the moment when this admiration was at the highest, that his spirits were the most elated, and that he felt more confidently than at any former moment, how very fortunate, and how very wise the choice had been, which gave him the possession of a treasure so highly appreciated by all.

Wentworth, though a vain, was, by nature, a shy man also; and though the habit of being much in society, as well as the consciousness of his own fortunate position in it, had enabled him, in a great degree, to conquer this constitutional weakness, it, nevertheless, returned upon him at times with very painful pertinacity, and often made him fancy, when surrounded by the brilliant and high-born, that his intellect was of too refined a nature to permit his participating freely in the frivolous pleasures of the world, and that, however much his station in life might render it necessary for him to mix with his equals, his best and happiest field of action was to be found in the dignified retirement of his paternal mansion. Had this notion been sufficiently permanent to have induced him to act upon it, he might, perhaps, have been a happier man; but a little real, or fancied success in society, was at any time sufficient to give wings to his philosophy, and to bring vanity forward in its place.

The *éclat* now derived from the fashionable celebrity of his wife had, for the present, totally beaten his misanthropic fancies from the field; he felt himself to be one of the most distinguished men in Paris, and told Isabella that he had, at length, finally decided upon having a regular London establishment, which he felt to be necessary, if only to give him the power of receiving whatever distinguished Frenchmen might chance to visit it, in order to make some return for the flattering reception he had met at Paris. It was solely from his being on such "hospitable thoughts intent," that the mischance I am about to relate arose.

The duc de B—— was strenuously advocating the classic dignity of the "Merope," and stating his persuasion that it was impossible any drama of the British bard should produce so poetical and elevating an effect upon the scene.

"Have you read 'Coriolanus'?" said Isabella, eagerly. "I have never seen it in action, it is true; but is it possible to read it, and doubt what its scenic effect would be?"

"Let me challenge you, M. le duc," said Wentworth, in his most courteous manner, "to make a party with my young wife to decide this question. Come and pay us a visit at my London mansion, next spring, and I will undertake that 'Coriolanus' shall be played for you."

And what was the answer to this gracious compliment? What was the duke's reply to an invitation so very publicly given? That he heard it, there could be no doubt; for he, as well as several of those around him, turned the glance of an eye towards Mr. Wentworth, as he spoke. But this was all the notice it obtained; this was all the attention that could be spared at that moment from Isabella, who, too earnestly occupied herself to know what had been said, was rapidly turning over the pages of the little Shakspeare, to find a passage which she wished to bring in competition to one that had been quoted from Voltaire, and who it was hoped would repeat the treat she had given them some moments before, by reading a few lines aloud.

It had not been without some struggle with his constitutional shyness, that Mr. Wentworth pronounced the speech recorded above; he had for some days been on the alert to seize on a favourable opportunity for giving the duc de B—— the invitation he meditated, and he was not sorry to have found it at a moment when so distinguished a circle was around them. Could he for one short moment have subdued the emotion which arose within him at the manner in which it was listened to, he would have received the most graceful thanks, and the most obliging promises in return; for the gallant duke only kept silence, lest, by an ill-timed interruption, he might disappoint his own hopes, and those of many others, that they might enjoy a little more of Madame Wentworth's musical English. But this was more than Wentworth could achieve; and, colouring to the temples, he approached the sofa in order to lead his wife from it, at the very moment that, bursting into a gay laugh, she threw the volume from her; both because she could not instantly find what she wanted, and because she perceived the eagerness of the expectation she had excited.

"Your carriage is at the door, madam," in a whisper, husky with emotion, were the words he addressed to her; but, though his accent made her start, she hardly comprehended their unexpected import, and raising her eyes to his, remained for a moment motionless, and almost stupified at the expression she saw there.

"You are not well, Marmaduke!" she then exclaimed, rising

suddenly, and taking his still offered arm. "Excuse us, dear Mrs. Darville,—Mr. Wentworth is suffering, I am sure. Good night! good night! You shall see me without fail to-morrow."

Wentworth spoke not a word, but led her rapidly through the rooms and down the staircase to a vestibule crowded with servants; fortunately he immediately found his own among them. Their carriage was at no great distance, and in a few minutes they were driving rapidly towards their hotel.

Isabella was greatly alarmed, without, however, having the slightest idea as to what the matter might be which had so changed in an instant the demeanour of her husband from bland and cheerful urbanity to choleric agitation. An impulse purely affectionate, and mixed with no feminine hope of soothing him by a caress, led her to lay her hand on his, as she exclaimed, the moment they were seated in the carriage,—

"Dearest Marmaduke! what is it has disturbed you? For God's sake tell me!"

His hand was withdrawn, and his person also, as tightly enconcing himself in the corner of the vehicle, he crossed his arms upon his breast, and replied, through his closed teeth,—

"I have been insulted, madam!"

"Gracious Heaven! And by whom?"

"You must have been greatly engrossed by your own amusement, Mrs. Wentworth, to make such a question necessary," was the reply.

"I *was* engrossed, Marmaduke—happily and childishly engrossed, perhaps—by the books before us; therefore I entreat you to tell me what can possibly have happened so near me deserving the terrible words you have used. Will you not tell me, Wentworth?"

"It is an ungracious office which you require of me," he replied, in a voice of the deepest gloom, "and I beg to decline it. Should I ever again venture to risk in your presence the sensitive feelings of a gentleman in society of whose manners I am not perfectly assured, it will be my wish that you should display more of observance towards me, and less of familiarity towards them."

But hardly had he pronounced these words, before it struck him that his young wife might attribute them to a feeling of jealousy, and to this weakness he attached a degree of ridicule which would have made him endure almost anything before he yielded to it; whereupon, suddenly changing his manner, and drawing towards her, he threw his arm round her waist, and said, in a voice whose recovered kindness completely restored her spirits, and made her almost indifferent to whatever might follow,—

"My dearest Isabella! do not let this foolish business vex you, and I will have no reserve whatever on the subject. You must have heard the invitation—the very flattering invitation I must call it—which I gave to the duc de B——?"

"No, surely, I did not. When was this, Marmaduke?"

Wentworth winced, and it was only by a strong effort and after a considerable pause that he was able to continue his explanation; nay, even then the manner was again entirely changed, the encircling arm withdrawn, and the cold dry tone, which acted like slow poison on the heart of Isabella, succeeded to the frank, affectionate style that had so delightfully cheered her.

"It is impossible, Mrs. Wentworth, that you can enter very deeply into an affair that passed before your eyes, at your very elbow, without your being conscious of it. This invitation was given the moment before I quitted the drawing-room of Mrs. Darville, which I most heartily regret I ever entered."

"And what was his reply, Wentworth?"

"Nothing, madam; he did not condescend to answer me."

"He never heard you, Marmaduke!" replied Isabella eagerly. "For Heaven's sake, do not take offence because amidst the voice of general conversation your words were drowned!"

"My words were not drowned," he replied, with bitterness, "of that I had convincing proof, for he turned his impertinent eyes on me as I addressed him."

"It is quite impossible, Marmaduke," persisted Isabella, "that any offence could be intended. I am quite sure there was not one of the party who would not have received such a civility from you both gratefully and gracefully."

"*You* are quite sure!" repeated the astonished Wentworth, in accents of very genuine surprise; "am I, then, for the future, to resign my judgment into your hands? Do you conceive me altogether incapable of hearing and seeing for myself?"

Terrified, wounded, spirit-broken, Isabella's only answer was a heavy sigh, while the words, "Alas, alas!" escaped her almost without her knowing that she had spoken.

"Let me hear no exclamations of that kind, if you please, Isabella," said her husband; "and I request it may be understood between us that I shall be considered as competent, on all occasions, to judge for myself. I have given you—as I doubt not you will be ready to avow—a pretty strong proof of admiration and devoted attachment. Few young women in your position—. However, this is not a subject that I ever wish to touch upon; all I intend to say is, that the cleverness and sort of youthful talent which I have taken—and shall always take—so much pleasure in improving, must on no account be suffered to run wild, and master your discretion; and on this point I must

consider myself as the only competent judge. Believe me, Isabella, I have no wish that such talents and abilities as the retirement in which you have been brought up may have permitted to appear should be overlooked by any ; indeed, it is necessary, for my own honour, and the credit of my taste and judgment, that this should not be ; but, on the other hand, I have a right to expect that no vivacity of animal spirits shall ever carry you beyond the precise place which I wish you to hold in society. It is not seemly that a lady's voice should be heard in such a manner as to render that of her husband inaudible beside her. This, you will remember, is your own interpretation,—in which, however, I trust you are mistaken. But, whatever may have been the cause of it, the stubborn fact remains that I have been very grossly affronted ; and, as the best method of preventing scenes more disagreeable still, I shall give orders to Brixter to have everything ready for leaving this hateful city by mid-day to-morrow. Be careful, before you sleep, to let your maid know what she has to do to-morrow morning."

"She can easily do all that is necessary," replied Isabella. "But ought I not to see Mrs. Darville?—she has been so very kind to me."

"You will write to her, if you please. Our drive is over—we are at the door of the hotel. Let me hear no more of this distasteful subject, if you please—not the slightest allusion to it again, I must request of you."

Having said this, Mr. Wentworth got out of the carriage, the door of which was opened at the instant, and then stood, hat in hand, to assist Isabella. Poor girl!—how little could any one who looked at her guess her actual situation. Young, lovely, splendidly attired, leaving her elegant equipage by the assistance of her handsome, gallant, and assiduous husband, who could have imagined that she already felt a canker at her heart which rendered all these good gifts of nature and of fortune profitless and even irksome. But she implicitly obeyed the injunction last given, and sat down to be disattired by her maid, pale and silent, but without either sighs or tears ; and when Mr. Wentworth entered her room, she lay so profoundly still upon her pillow, that he perforce was obliged to suppose she was asleep.

## CHAPTER XI.

SAD—very sad—was the young bride's waking next morning; and she felt the sorrow before she could well remember its cause. "What has happened to me?" was the first distinct thought; and though memory could rehearse no great specific misery in reply, her heart felt not the lighter on that account.

Mr. Wentworth had already left the room, but she found him in the saloon examining accounts with Brixter; while the open canvas bag lying beside them, pouring forth its massive treasures of five-franc pieces, showed her that business was going on, and that the preparations for departure were already in full activity.

"Are you ready for breakfast, Marmaduke?" she said, endeavouring to speak as usual, and only failing by permitting her voice to be somewhat fainter and more gentle than before. But even this trifling variation was sufficient to awaken the fears of the conscious Wentworth, who raised his eyes with a sudden and almost stern look of inquiry to her face. But that face was lovely as ever; and its sweet harmony of feature was not without its effect.

"Quite ready, my love!" was the obliging reply. "I have been getting over all reckoning and paying that I might not disturb you by it. You will have some notes to write before we start. Do not forget Lady G——. We are engaged to dine at the embassy, you know, on Friday; so you must make apologies. There, Brixter, that is all right. You will find I have given you the amount of all the bills you have brought in; and be active to look after anything else that may be unpaid. Tell them to bring the coffee; and, remember, the horses are ordered at one precisely, and that *nothing* must be forgotten or left unsettled."

Brixter bowed, and left the room; and had the bride and bridegroom at that moment expressed their feelings, they would have confessed that this departure was far from being a relief to either of them. But both had recourse to the occupation of their hands, which on such occasions is the best thing that can be done. Mr. Wentworth drew forth his gold pencil-case, adjusted its point, and began to write memoranda; while his wife busied herself with coffee-cups and tea-spoons. But she had no courage to break the silence which seemed somewhat



heavily settling upon them till the arrival of the breakfast, when her sweet voice pronounced, "Shall I pour out your coffee, Wentworth?" very nearly in the same accent as heretofore.

This sound, and the sight of Galignani's paper at the same moment, putting Mr. Wentworth entirely at his ease, he drew near her quite as usual, and she was petted and waited upon as assiduously as on any morning since their arrival. Nevertheless, the breakfast was not permitted to last long, ere he again reminded her that she had notes to write; but this was done with the utmost politeness; and her elegant travelling-desk being laid open before her, paper, pens, bougie, wax, seal, and so forth, all in order, he added, "Do not delay, my love," and prepared to leave the room.

"Stay one moment, Mr. Wentworth," said Isabella, blushing lest her words might be considered as an infringement of his last night's command. "Stay one moment, and tell me what I am to say to Mrs. Darville, Lady G——, Madame de Beaumont, and the other places we are engaged to?"

The brow of Wentworth was overclouded in a moment. "Say?" he repeated with as much disdain as could be thrown into the pronounciation of so innocent a word—"pray say whatever you please," and without waiting for any rejoinder, he quitted the room, and drew the door after him with very expressive energy.

Isabella had one characteristic which never left her on any occasion, whether of great or of little importance; from principle, from habit, and from inclination, she invariably adhered to truth. The task, therefore, which she was now left to perform was to her much more difficult than it would have been to many others; but it must be done, and promptly. This was a necessity which pressed upon her much too sharply to be resisted. She must write, and she did. She rapidly scribbled apologies for breaking the engagements they had formed; but in no instance did she state any reason for doing so, except that they were going to leave Paris directly; to Mrs. Darville a short but affectionate farewell was added.

Her notes were finished and folded ere Mr. Wentworth returned: he walked up to her table without speaking; but, on perceiving the half dozen proofs of her diligence that lay scattered there, he exclaimed in a voice that showed he was well pleased, "Already finished! What a rapid penwoman I have got for my secretary!"

"Perhaps you will have the kindness to look at them, and seal them for me, while I go and see if Wilson is almost ready," replied Isabella, rising.

His eye had already glanced through one of the notes ere she

reached the door; and she was arrested in her retreat by his saying, "This is terribly cold, Isabella! Are they all equally destitute of excuse?"

"I had no excuse to offer," replied Isabella, colouring.

"I fear then I must trouble you to sit down again," he said, struggling to conceal the anger that was, however, equally evident in his voice and look; "such notes as these are worse than nothing."

"I will willingly write again," she replied, resuming her seat; "but indeed, Marmaduke, you must tell me what to say."

"I should be sorry to accuse you of so much dulness, my dear, as you choose to take credit for. You surely can be at no loss. There are a multitude of excellent apologies."

"But I do not know—I do not understand," said Isabella, greatly embarrassed. "Am I to tell what happened last night?"

It would be difficult to express the extremity of displeasure which this unlucky question occasioned; and it was fortunate that the eye of the offender was not raised to behold the effect it produced. Wentworth himself, the moment after, was thankful that she had not looked at him; nor did he speak till the first feeling was past.

"I hardly know what that question means," he said at length; "not all that it seems to do, I hope?"

"Be not displeased, my dearest Wentworth, if I confess myself totally at a loss to understand what your wishes are," she replied: "surely," she added, "I need not say that, did I understand, I would willingly comply with them."

"That you have been brought up in great retirement, and in most profound ignorance of the world, I well know," said Wentworth, affecting to speak with great calmness; but that you should have yet to learn the meaning of the word *apology*, rather surpasses my expectations. I must, however, submit to play the part of teacher, and you, I hope, will not object to that of scholar?"

"Oh, no!" she replied, cheerfully; "most gladly will I learn whatever you will have the kindness to teach," and again drawing her desk towards her, she took a pen, and sat in act to write, looking towards him for her instructions with a pretty air of playful submissiveness, well calculated to soothe a fit of the spleen.

He looked at her for a moment, and once more his gloomy brow relaxed into a smile. "Well then, Isabella," said he, "write, 'Presents compliments,' and all that, and then add, 'and begs to express her own deep regret, as well as that of Mr. Wentworth, that the unexpected arrival of letters from England, upon business of great importance, compels them immediately to return, and relinquish the pleasure—and so on.'"

"But I cannot say that, Marmaduke, for it is not true," she replied gravely, yet looking in his face, not without some hope that he might be jesting.

Too plainly did that face answer her. Her words were worm-wood to him. Wentworth had not so perseveringly studied all the theory of the science that makes a gentleman, without knowing that lying makes no part of it; yet at that moment his heart told him that not only then was he guilty of the mean, vulgar, pitiful vice, but that he was habitually driven to practise it by the difficulties into which his unchecked violence was perpetually plunging him. This self-conviction was terrible; yet what was that compared to the agony—the degradation of its being pointed out to him by the object of his generous—his unexampled love? All attempt at conquering his feelings was now out of the question; all her beauty, and all the effect he had permitted it to have on him, offered but so much the stronger reason for his resenting the injury she had done him, and he threw upon her a glance that seemed almost to express abhorrence.

"Leave me!" he cried—"leave me, if you please. I have not been accustomed at any period, from childhood to the present hour, to be treated with indignity. Let me recover myself ere we meet again." These words were not uttered immediately, nor indeed till she had watched his countenance and his action as he stalked up and down the room till her terror had increased to a pitch which made the command to leave him most welcome. She started from her place as he spoke, like a frightened fawn, and rushing into her bedroom, closed the door, and sank upon her knees beside the bed.

For some moments she perceived not that Wilson was in the room, and sobbed without restraint as she rested her head against the bedclothes. Fortunately this agony was not watched and commented upon by an ordinary domestic, for this Wilson, now converted into a fashionable-looking lady's-maid, had, as a village child, long known and loved her. This young woman, at an early age left motherless, had for years been kindly watched and cared for by the family at the parsonage. Isabella especially, who was nearly her own age, had been long indulged in the pleasure of bestowing upon her whatever clothes were discarded from her own wardrobe. Mrs. Worthington superintended her progress through the village school, of which the good pastor himself declared her to be one of the best scholars; the Misses Clark employed no other sempstress when the literary labours of the one sister, or the embroidering mania of the other, left more employment for the needle than their one maid, Dorothy, could manage; Margaret paid for her learning to plait straw, Charles depended on her for his fishing-nets, and uncle David had pre-

sented her with a Bible and prayer-book; so that she was linked to her unfortunate young mistress by many ties, not the less binding from their simple texture.

The terrible, the unexpected spectacle of the happy, thrice happy, Isabella, reduced from a state of unequalled felicity to the miserable condition in which she now saw her, for a moment completely stupified the poor girl; and suffering the trinkets she was packing up to drop from her fingers, she stood gazing at the unintelligible and almost incredible apparition with straining eyes, open mouth, and hands raised in speechless dismay. But this first confusion of intellect past, she approached the weeping bride; and forgetting everything but the fond affection of so many years, threw her arms round her, exclaiming,—

“O Miss Isabella!—dear, dear Miss Isabella! What has happened? Is my master ill? Is there any accident?”

Shocked and ashamed at having thus unrestrainedly exposed her misery, Isabella's first impulse, as she suddenly rose from her knees, was to check the familiarity of her humble friend, and send her away that she might weep alone; but a glance at the tearful eyes and pale cheeks of poor Wilson changed her mood. She felt too wretchedly alone, too hopelessly distant from all the dear accustomed faces in the sunshine of whose love she had passed her gay and happy life, to look with indifference on the pitying countenance of one whom she had been used to see amongst them.

“O Mary!” she exclaimed, dropping her head upon the girl's shoulder, and suffering her tears to flow without restraint; “I am very, very wretched!”

“But is there help for it, Miss Isabella—madam?—dear mistress! Tell me, for God's sake, what has happened, and you in such a glory of happiness, to make you tremble and shake as you do now? Where is my master, ma'am? Let me go and find him.”

Tight and firm was the grasp with which Isabella now held her, but she answered not a word.

“And you will not tell me? And I may not know what terrible thing has happened? But sit down, Miss Isabella; you tremble so, you are not fit to stand! Thank God, we are going home. Nothing has happened to change that, I hope.”

“No, Wilson, nothing has changed that,” said Isabella, making a strong effort to recover herself: “and do not ask me any more questions about my tears. It seems that I am but a child still, Mary, to cry so foolishly. Dear uncle David!—he said I was too young; and, perhaps—— But go on packing, Wilson, and I will sit here quietly and look at you.”

"The greatly puzzled waiting-maid obeyed, only delaying her occupation while she mixed a little *eau de Cologne* in a glass of water, which she presented in silence to her mistress; and in silence Isabella received it, trying, however, to thank her with a smile; but it was so sad a one, that the girl was fain to turn away her head as she took the glass, that its effect upon her might not be perceived, and returning to her occupation, showed as much delicacy as feeling, by concealing her own countenance, and avoiding to look on that of her mistress.

Thus left to herself, Isabella's thoughts followed the train suggested by the recollection of Colonel Seaton. Why had he, who had ever rejoiced in all that gave her joy, so constantly looked sad and mournful during the short period of Mr. Wentworth's triumphant courtship? This was

"A question she had never asked before;"

and if she had, the answer would have been (whether given by herself or to those around her)—"Because he cannot bear the idea of losing his darling!" But now, that a new and terrible light had broken in upon her mind, she felt inclined to interpret his manner differently. "Is it possible," thought she, "that he alone, of all the lookers-on, saw that all was not so glorious as it seemed to be? Alas! if so, why was not his opposition stronger?"

Startled at this mental question, which seemed for the first time to disclose to her own heart how deep, how terrible were her fears for the future, she rose from her chair, and, with feverish eagerness, began to assist Wilson in what she was doing.

"Pray do not trouble yourself, ma'am, I shall have quite time to finish everything," said Wilson; adding, almost in a whisper, as if afraid to trust her voice—"had you not better keep quite still ma'am?"

"No, Wilson, no! quite the contrary. Let me be employed; let me think about the going home. Home!—O, Wilson! I am not going to my own dear home."

"You will be very near it, though, ma'am," replied the affectionate girl, touching instinctively upon the surest source of consolation, let the sorrow for which it was wanted be of what nature it might. But, in fact, something approaching to the truth was already working its way into the femininely acute mind of Mary Wilson. The manner in which her proposal of seeking Mr. Wentworth had been received, the seemingly involuntary grasp which had prevented her going to him; and, lastly, this allusion to her own dear home, altogether went far towards convincing the waiting-maid that, in spite of his

handsomeness, and his greatness, and his wealth, her dear young mistress might very likely have been better off if the great man had never happened to fall in love with her.

But she wisely and resolutely determined to keep all these conjectures to herself; a resolution which corresponded very conveniently with that of her mistress, who at the same moment that her prophetic heart whispered the saddest forebodings for the future, decided that, as the fate she had chosen for herself admitted of no remedy, it would be equally weak and wicked to render her husband hateful in the eyes of her family and friends, by disclosing what must make them miserable, without in the least degree alleviating her own unhappiness.

"No; none shall ever know that the bright dreams we have all so fondly cherished are turned to shadows dark and dismal as the night! They may see me grow thin and wan—they may see me fade and die, perhaps, and their fond hearts may mourn for me. This will be sad enough, and I so young too; but ten thousand times worse would it be could they know that Marma-duce—my pride, my glory, my beloved—was breaking my heart by his unkindness."

Such were the meditations of Isabella, as she continued to pull out drawer after drawer, and push them in again, with an air of busy occupation, that but ill concealed from the observation of her attendant the fever of spirits from which she was suffering.

This scene had continued nearly an hour, when a knock was heard at the outer door of the bedroom. "Who is that, Wilson?" exclaimed Isabella, with nervous quickness. "Go to the door, will you, and see who it is that knocks."

Wilson obeyed, and immediately returned with a letter, which had been delivered to her by a chamber-maid, directed to "*Madame Wentworth*."

Isabella knew the hand, and trembled as she broke the seal. "Leave me, my good Wilson," said she, before she ventured to read a line of the contents, unwilling that any should witness the feelings they might draw forth. "Leave me alone for a little while. You have your own things to put up, have you not?"

Wilson disappeared, and Isabella read the following lines:—

"In the situation in which I have placed myself relatively to you, Isabella, it has become my duty to see your failings with an eye of indulgence. I will endeavour to make the doing so a pleasure as well as a duty, but let not this kindness—I must call it this *amiable* kindness—on my part, lead to carelessness or inattention on yours. I am aware that your position in life has not familiarized you with persons in any degree resembling myself—the refinement, the delicacy, the sensitiveness of the higher classes can only, I believe, be understood by themselves—and this deficiency, which, however unfortunate, cannot be justly attributed to you as a fault, I will endeavour constantly to keep in mind as the best antidote to the irri-

tation likely to be produced by your ignorance of the observance which a high-bred gentleman wishes to meet in all who approach him. But, though unacquainted with that last best finish, which nothing but station and fashion can bestow, you have been brought up by eminently respectable parents, Isabella; and I have a right to expect that the good principles they must have instilled should be constantly brought into action during our future lives. Above all things, never forget the devoted attachment I have shown to you; and by your docility and constant endeavours to please me, let me perceive that you are anxious to atone, as far as lies in your power, for the great inequality in our past positions. My attachment to you, my dear Isabella, is deep and sincere; and I flatter myself that by a proper attention on your part to smoothing the points of difference inevitably to be expected between us, our lives will pass very happily together: but remember always that when you perceive in me symptoms of agitation or displeasure, which, for the reasons above hinted at, it is possible you may not understand,—remember always that on such occasions you explain to yourself what seems unintelligible, by at once taking it for granted that I have good cause for feeling as I do. And now, my love, let me see you enter the saloon with a cheerful countenance, trusting to my indulgent tenderness for a perfect forgiveness of all that has passed.

"I hope your imperial and boxes are nearly ready, as the time fixed for our departure is almost arrived. I have despatched proper letters to our friends, so be easy on that score, and be assured that you shall never hear me allude to the subject more.

"With the most perfect affection,

"I am, my dearest Isabella,

"Your affectionate husband,

"MARMADUCE WENTWORTH.

"P.S. Let me advise you, my love, to preserve this letter; its occasional perusal may essentially assist you in the regulation of your conduct, under any little circumstances of difficulty which may arise between us. I have, I think, said enough to enable you to return to me without pain, and I expect your immediate appearance accordingly."

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A kinder heart than Isabella's, a sweeter temper, a disposition less prone to take offence, or more ready to forget it, might have been sought in vain among all the daughters of Eve; but she had withal deeply implanted within her heart of hearts, in her conscience and her understanding, a clear, strong sense of justice, which, joined to somewhat more than an average proportion of common sense, made her as unfit a wife for Mr. Wentworth as he could well have chosen. It was not anger she felt on reading this letter; that is an emotion by no means incompatible either with love or esteem—but it was contempt, the most fatal blight that can fall upon either.

It was a pitiable sight, the countenance of that young creature, as she took a rapid glance forward at the destiny which lay before her! It was a dark and massive shadow that fell upon it, and she felt its heavy gloom with terrible distinctness. But she had no time for meditation; her appearance, gay, grateful, and devoted, was instantly expected in the saloon. It is a dreadful situation for a being nurtured in truth like Isabella to feel that duty in some sort requires its sacrifice; but so it was with her; for were she to permit any portion of the feeling which swelled her young heart to appear, all possibility of her remaining on decent terms with the man she had chosen as her husband must

be for ever destroyed. Happily, in the keenest moment of this struggle with herself, she remembered her parents, and the misery that must fall upon them did she push things to extremity; she remembered, too, that she had vowed submission and obedience, and that these vows must serve her as a rule of conduct when affection failed.

Many ladies, perhaps, would find it difficult to conceive how greatly this last consideration tended to calm the agitation of Isabella. In the midst of all her suffering, the predominant feeling was a wish to do right, and nothing could tend so distinctly to the simplifying her arduous task, as remembering that the duty she had thus taken upon herself was paramount, and that if its fulfilment did not suffice to render her a happy wife, it must at least secure her from being a sinful one.

Strong in this well-principled reasoning, she immediately proposed to obey the mandate which required her immediate attendance; and having sedulously arranged her hair, bathed her eyes, and removed as much as possible every trace of agitation from her appearance, she entered the sitting-room.

Mr. Wentworth was evidently in a state of considerable perturbation. When angry, he had the habit of passing his fingers through his hair, which he wore rather long, and making it stand strangely erect upon his head. It was now "more like quills than hair," which of itself gave to his aspect an appearance of anything rather than calmness; and, in addition to this, he was walking up and down the large apartment with long impatient strides.

Nothing could be better calculated to cure all this agitation than were the look and manner of Isabella as she entered. She was ever simple and unaffected, for the spirit of truth pervaded all she did, as well as all she said; and as her gentleness and submission were quite genuine, her whole appearance brought to the mind of her well-pleased husband the agreeable conviction that his letter had produced exactly the effect he intended, and convinced her that he was perfectly right in all he had said and done.

The contemplation of her features, which led to this conclusion, took but a moment, and he then stepped forward to meet her with a smile, which, as he produced it, made him conscious that his muscles were somewhat rigid. However, he felt that his manner of receiving her was perfectly gentlemanlike; and that it might be tender, too, he said, as he led her to the sofa, "Kiss me, my love!"

Poor Isabella! She hardly knew herself why this obliging command seemed more difficult to obey than any other he could have laid upon her. She had no time to reason then upon the



monstrous weight of conjugal chains when the cotton and velvet of affection cease to envelop them—but she held up her sweet innocent face, and he kissed her.

“Are your boxes ready, my love?” was his next speech.

Isabella answered readily, “Very nearly, I think;” and pleased to find that she was not, as she feared, to receive an oral communication in continuation of the letter, she added, with very sincere zeal and alacrity, “but I believe I had better hasten Wilson a little. She has little more to do, however, than to lock everything.”

“I hope, Isabella, that you do not find that young woman dilatory? I confess I was doubtful at the time you told me you had hired her whether we should not have done better by accepting the dowager Mrs. Wentworth’s kind offer of finding an attendant for you.”

Nothing could be less in sympathy with Isabella’s feelings at this moment than such a hint of the eligibility of superseding her faithful friend Mary Wilson, by a *protégée* of the dowager Mrs. Wentworth’s; but she had the wisdom to say only that Wilson had been very active.

“That is well—I will ring the bell for you, my love, that you may inquire if everything be completed. Brixter, I suppose, may enter your apartment to superintend the porters?”

“In a moment he may,” said Isabella, recollecting the trinkets which still lay open upon the table, and without waiting for permission, she hurried back to her room; but before she had passed the door leading to it she was arrested by the voice of her husband.

“I flatter myself, my dear Mrs. Wentworth, that our people are sufficient to do all that is necessary in preparation for our departure. I trust in God that you do not fancy yourself under the necessity of being useful? This indeed would be a degradation that I could not bear.”

Had Isabella been in a gayer state of mind, this energetic demonstration of the aristocratic *far niente*, by which so many particularly gentlemanlike persons distinguish themselves, might have tried her gravity severely; but she stood it perfectly well now, and only answering, “No, I merely wish to say a word to Wilson respecting the trinkets,” was permitted to pursue her way.

In less than an hour afterwards they were *en route* for England.

## CHAPTER XII.

THE journey was unmarked by any adventure; nor did anything very important occur to assist Isabella in further estimating the probable annoyances of her future life, except indeed that she became every day and every hour more fully aware that she was to "live, move, and have her being" wholly and solely, in great things and in small, for weal or for woe, according to, and dependent on, the will and pleasure of Mr. Wentworth.

She sedulously schooled herself to bear this well, and did it perhaps almost too successfully; for there was in the spirit of her husband a principle of resistance which made a little opposition now and then as agreeable as the pungency of Cayenne pepper and mustard to the palates that require them. However, he did not absolutely quarrel with her for not contradicting him; only upon one occasion when he had drawn up a window of the carriage after she had put it down he said, "My dear love, I think the air may be too much for you; but do not scruple to object to anything I do, that you may not happen to like—it will in no way displease me: indeed, on the contrary, I should rather like it, as I feel great interest in discovering what your feelings and sentiments are on all subjects; and when it happens that I do not perfectly agree with you, it need produce no mortification on your part, as, of course, dearest, I shall never scruple to set you right. Ask then for everything you wish, my dearest Isabella, with perfect confidence that I will never abuse the trust you have reposed in me by permitting the slightest thing that I do not perfectly approve. Look upon me as a sort of second Providence, my love. Millions of petitions, as we well know, my love, are daily offered, which Wisdom heeds not—and yet no harm is done."

But it was not on points such as these—it was not in studying the little more or the little less display of the peculiarities of Mr. Wentworth's character from day to day—that the mind of his wife was occupied; from the time she left Paris to that at which she reached Oak Park, she might be said to have had but one thought, and that was how best to hide from every member of her family the miserable change which had taken place in her heart since she left them.

They believed her so perfectly happy, and were themselves so

"blest in thus believing," that to undeceive them would cause her almost as much suffering as the truth itself had inflicted on her own heart. This must not be. She believed it her duty to hide her husband's faults, she knew it would produce misery to reveal them; so that by the time she reached her home, her mind was as steadfastly bent upon concealing from every eye the sorrow that had fixed itself upon her, as on enduring it with patience. There was a placid firmness in her eye as she stepped from her carriage, and for the first time entered her magnificent home as its mistress, which was seen and inwardly commented upon by Mr. Wentworth.

"She feels her importance as she takes her state upon her," thought he, "and it is right that she should do so. It is a situation of great dignity. On me will rest the duty of regulating this natural emotion of pride and exultation properly. In my love for this beautiful creature, I must never lose sight of the delightful task which I virtually took upon myself when I married her. I must not forget that such an education of the mind as befits my wife has yet to be given her; but with beauty and capacity, such as I have selected, the office of instruction must prove a most delicious one!"

A long line of servants ushered them through the entrance-hall to a room brilliantly lighted for their reception; but there was not one familiar face among them. "Is this coming home?" thought Isabella. How differently, five short weeks ago, did I paint to myself what this return would be!"

Yet what had passed in the interval? No terrible event, no fatal discovery of former loves and entanglements, no cruel indication of fading passion, no heart-rending symptoms of indifference, nothing of all this had fallen upon her; yet had she endured them all, her spirit could scarcely have been so irremediably wounded and crushed within her as it was now. She felt as if she had married one man, and discovered her husband to be another.

Had Wentworth proved what her young heart fancied she should find him, her mother, ay, all her family would have been summoned there to welcome her: but she regretted not their absence; she would not have had to meet one of them that night for the worth of all her jewels!

Nothing could be more beautiful than the young bride's apartments; and there was so evident a design to please her in the arrangement of them, that as her husband himself condescendingly ushered her into her elegant boudoir, expressing his hope that she would find everything she could wish for there, her heart reproached her for permitting one fault to neutralise the effect of so much affection, and she turned to him

with a smile, that looked almost like that of Isabella Worthington, as she replied, "I must be a most unreasonable creature, my dear Marmaduke, could I wish for more!"

"The shrine can hardly be made precious enough for the treasure that is to be lodged within it!" he exclaimed, looking at her with passionate admiration; and perhaps Mr. Wentworth had never in the course of his life felt so nearly happy as at that moment; for he looked with conscious exultation on various possessions, the finished beauty and elegance of which could not be questioned by the most fastidious critic. And not only were they his, wholly, solely, exclusively his, but they were so by his own tasteful selection and consummate gentlemanlike judgment.

It was, unhappily, more from an ostentatious wish that other eyes should look upon all the fine things he had collected round him, than from any strong feeling of affection to his newly acquired relatives, that he thus addressed Isabella during breakfast on the following morning:—

"My dear love, would it not be agreeable to you were I to invite your family to a friendly dinner with us? What say you to to-morrow? or next day, perhaps?"

"It will give me great pleasure to see them all," replied Isabella, colouring deeply from a complication of feelings, not one of which, happily, he had the slightest power of discerning.

"Then it shall be done, my love!" he rejoined, in the most amiable tone imaginable. "Will you write? Or do you think they would be more gratified if I were to write myself?"

"If you do not want the carriage, Marmaduke, I should like to go to them," said Isabella, while a tear very nearly found its way to her eye.

"Want the carriage? My dear Mrs. Wentworth! How totally ignorant you are of all things concerning the establishment of a man of fashion! Why, my dear child, do you really suppose that you and I are to jog out alternately; first one taking a turn and then the other?" and Mr. Wentworth laughed quite merrily as he patted her cheek. "No, my love, that is not the scale on which the Oak Park establishment is arranged. There are, if I mistake not, about half-a-dozen equipages at our orders, and amongst them your own carriage, Mrs. Wentworth, which you may use on the present occasion, if you wish it. I have no objection whatever to your going to Abbot's Preston this morning. I shall ride to Taunton, I think. I know the people will be expecting that I should show myself. And one of these days, my dear, it will be proper for you to drive over also. I will drive you myself in the phaëton with a couple of out-riders. That is the sort of style that will gratify the town

most; we shall be so much more seen than in any other species of equipage."

"Shall I order the carriage directly?" said Isabella.

"You are longing then for this little display, my love?" replied her husband, again indulging in a more lively demonstration of mirth than was usual with him. "You need not blush so beautifully about it, dearest, it is very natural."

Isabella was somewhat at a loss to find obliging words by which to inform him that he altogether mistook her. "No, dear Marmaduke! I was not thinking about Taunton to-day. They will be so delighted, you know, to see me at home!"

"At Abbot's Preston, I suppose you mean, Mrs. Wentworth. I must beg you to consider this mansion as your home. You may go to Abbot's Preston, certainly. I have already told you that I have no objection whatever to your doing so."

"And shall I ask them all to dine with us to-morrow?" said Isabella, in a gentle voice.

"By all means. Certainly. By all means, Isabella. I shall always, I am sure, have great pleasure. By the way, will it be absolutely necessary to invite that *very* old gentleman? I shall not know what in the world to do with him—shall I?"

"What, my uncle David?" she replied, with a sensation in her throat that made utterance difficult. "Dearest Marmaduke, let him come! He shall not trouble you. He loves me so dearly, and I, too, love him so very much!"

"Oh! well, once in a way, you know, can be of no great consequence; but people of that age are certainly very troublesome in society. And the old ladies—do you want the old ladies, too, Isabella?"

"I should like to call on my aunts this morning," she replied, "and, if you have no objection, Wentworth, I should like also to invite them for to-morrow."

"What, *toute la boutique*! Well, so be it; they will like to see the place, I dare say, and the table, and sideboard, and so on. Perhaps it will gratify you, my love, to have the service of plate used? I believe it is a sort of thing that flatters people a good deal."

Isabella, poor thing, knew as well, as if instead of eighteen summers she had passed eighty in studying mankind, who it was would be gratified by substituting plate for porcelain; but she smiled as pleased an acquiescence as she could, and was on the eve of rising to quit the breakfast-table, when the butler entered with the postbag.

This is always an important moment at every country mansion, and at Oak Park it was particularly so. Not, indeed, that Mr. Wentworth's private correspondence was either very large,

or very interesting, but he had frequent applications connected with his seat in Parliament, and moreover, he had two daily papers, of the most opposite politics, to read and digest.

The small Bramah key appended to his watchchain was applied to the lock, and two or three letters, together with the usual proportion of newspapers, fell upon the table.

"Here is a letter from my mother," said Mr. Wentworth, breaking open one of them. "Really, this is very kind, indeed, and very gratifying. My mother says, Isabella, that she will come to pass a few weeks with us, as soon as we are ready to receive her; and that I am sure will be immediately. I am quite pleased at this, for I confess to you it is more than I expected. So sought after, and admired as she is! She will be of the greatest possible advantage to you, my love; it is exactly what you want. There is no woman in England, let her rank be what it will, more capable of supplying the inevitable deficiencies of a country education, than the dowager Mrs. Wentworth. I consider this visit as a great point gained, I assure you. But observe, Isabella, we must have no more such *omnium gatherum* parties after her arrival, as that you propose for to-morrow. It is not the sort of thing she has been used to, and I am quite sure she could not endure it. I must answer this welcome letter by return of post; and, of course, you will wish me to assure her of the deep sense you feel of her kindness."

"Certainly," said Isabella.

"And now, my dear, you may get ready for your drive, unless, indeed, you wish to see your housekeeper first, and consult her about to-morrow. Remember, if you please, that I shall always wish to see the bill of fare, which she will make out, when you have told her the number and rank of the party you expect. On the present occasion, it is probable that she may think a very simple entertainment sufficient; but you may hint to her, if you please, before she leaves you, that I rather incline to something of display for to-morrow. There are several reasons for this, which, however, you need not enter into with her, but merely say that I wish to speak to her myself."

Isabella bowed her beautiful head, and left the room.

For a few minutes, sheltered in the retirement of her draped dressing-room, she sat down to indulge, poor soul! if so it could be called, in solitary meditation on all the honours that awaited her. She felt, however, that this employment was not likely to do her any good. Had she been a ranting young lady, it is likely enough, she would have exclaimed, "That way madness lies!" but as it was, she only rose from the *bergère* in which she had placed herself, and rang the bell.

Wilson gave one anxious glance at her face, as she entered, to

inform herself if the long protracted breakfast had been a pleasant one; but nothing was to be read there; she thought her mistress looked pale, and beyond this it would have been difficult to make any remark.

"You must order the carriage for me, Wilson," said Isabella, "I am going to drive to Abbot's Preston and Appleton this morning."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the unsophisticated waiting-maid. "That will be a pleasure for you!"

Isabella smiled faintly, but said nothing to encourage any further expression of sympathy, and Wilson prepared to leave the room.

"But I must see the housekeeper first," cried Isabella, recollecting herself. "What is her name, Wilson? And what sort of a person is she?"

"Her name is Oldfield, ma'am, and she seems to be a very grand, formal old lady—at least to us; but, of course, she will seem different to you."

"Well!—send her here, directly, that I may speak to her while the carriage is getting ready; and, when you have given the coachman his orders, come back to me."

When Mrs. Oldfield arrived, Isabella thought that her friend Mary had by no means exaggerated in calling her "grand and formal." She entered the dressing-room, like the personification of one of Queen Elizabeth's maids of honour upon the stage; and her young mistress wondered where so very old-fashioned a cap and pinners could have been found to superintend her establishment. This, however, being a matter of no great importance, was soon forgotten in the bride's anxiety not to disgrace herself in the eyes of so experienced a personage.

"Good morning, Mrs. Oldfield," she said, graciously bending her head.

The woman made a low but silent courtesy in return.

"I wish you, if you please, to write a bill of fare for to-morrow; a handsome dinner for eight persons; and let your master see it. I am going out immediately for the whole morning, but when Mr. Wentworth has looked over it, you may proceed in your preparations. If he approve it, I shall be quite satisfied."

The woman's formal features were drawn into increasing primness as she listened; nevertheless, Isabella fancied she could discern something like a lurking smile about the mouth, thin and compressed as were the lips. This, however, moved her not greatly, and though she disliked the general appearance and manner of this chilling *chef de famille*, she felt no fear that she should ever be exposed to any impertinence from her, as Mr. Wentworth was too careful of observances of all sorts, to

permit skill of any kind to atone for want of deference. She had a sort of dim recollection, too, that it was the dowager Mrs. Wentworth who had recommended this unattractive functionary; a sufficient guarantee, had any been wanting, that there could be nothing very seriously objectionable about her demeanour.

Wilson entered as Mrs. Oldfield was dismissed, and something almost like happiness once more fluttered at the heart of Isabella, as she prepared herself for the expedition which was to take her to all she loved most dearly upon earth.

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### CHAPTER XIII.

THE first happy letter written from Paris by Isabella, had been a source of delight to the whole family; and although some others which followed had been composed under circumstances and feelings widely different, they were too cautiously written to produce any alarm: haste, occupation, the multiplicity of novelties which surrounded her, being satisfactorily pleaded to account for the absence of that fresh and delightful spirit of gossiping communication which pervaded the first.

Notwithstanding the unexpected suddenness of their return, Isabella had despatched a few lines to announce it; and she found, as she expected, her mother, father, Margaret, and her uncle David, all eagerly looking out for her.

Perhaps if they had disclosed their inmost feelings, there was not one of the party whose delight in seeing her was not increased by her coming alone; but nothing was said, or even looked, to make Isabella aware of this, and their caresses for the first few minutes were mingled with affectionate inquiries for her husband's health and welfare.

Next followed the quieter moments of fond examination of the loved face restored to them, and then it was that the heavy task of Isabella began.

"Isabella does not look well," said uncle David.

"No; you are right, sir," said her father, looking at her attentively. "I cannot say she is pale now, for our gaze has quite restored her colour, but surely she is thinner than when she left us."

"Are you quite well, dearest?" said her mother.

"Perhaps she has been too dissipated in Paris, mamma," said Margaret. "Come, Isabella!" she added, gaily, "give an account of yourself; how many nights have you been in bed before the witching hour of twelve?"



"Not many, certainly," replied Isabella, rallying under the welcome shelter of this *non causa, pro causa*. "Paris is a very delightful city; but it would not be easy to lead the rational, regular sort of life there, that I was used to at Abbot's Preston. I should not like to live in Paris."

"And do you think, Isabella, that you shall be able at Oak Park to live the same sort of life that you did here?" said Colonel Seaton, with a smile that, spite of himself, had much sadness in it.

But now, again, Isabella was relieved by Margaret, who exclaimed laughingly,—

"God forbid, that this should be necessary for her health, uncle David! for if it be, Mrs. Wentworth will infallibly be very sick."

"There will, at least, be no necessity for sitting up till past midnight," replied Isabella, "and it is certain that I have not been educated to bear late hours: but do not talk any more about my looks; tell me when you heard from Charles; and how my aunts are?"

"Charles writes oftener than ever he did in his life," replied Margaret, "and all his letters are filled with questions about the horses and dogs at Oak Park. I hope you have prepared Mr. Wentworth to be plagued to death during the Christmas holidays, for I am quite sure Charles will allow him no rest."

"Dear boy?" said Mrs. Wentworth, with a sigh she could not quite repress. "I must contrive to keep him in better order than that. And dear aunt Lucy, and aunt Christina too, are they quite well?"

"Quite well," said Mrs. Worthington, "and so anxious to see you that they would have been here to-day in the hope of meeting you, only that they flattered themselves they too might have the honour of a visit from Mrs. Wentworth. I hope you intend to go there, Isabella?"

"Indeed I do, and perhaps you and Margaret will come with me?"

"Delightful!" exclaimed her sister, "there is nothing in the world I should like so much."

"And will you give me a seat on your coach-box, Isabella?" said her father, laughing. "I should enjoy seeing Miss Christina's reception of you exceedingly."

"Oh, yes!" replied Isabella, feeling for a moment quite happy; but turning towards her uncle, she again read in his eyes, which were fondly fixed upon her, the same expression of sadness she had remarked before, and which she now felt she understood but too well.

"Would you like to take a drive with me, uncle David?" she

said ; “ we can contrive it very well, by putting the footman on the dicky, and letting Margaret sit behind with papa.”

“ No, dearest, not to-day,” said the old man, holding out his hand to her ; “ but it is a pleasure to hear your dear voice, sounding so nearly as it used to do.”

“ But you will take your luncheon with us, before we set out,” said Mrs. Worthington ; “ so let the carriage be put up. We must show you some of Charles’s droll letters. I am sure they will make you laugh ; though there was one, by-the-by, that was very melancholy. His poor friend Alfred Reynolds has been dangerously ill, and Charles really gives a most touching description of his poor mother’s agony when she came to see him. Charles thinks, too, that she was greatly distressed for money to meet all the expenses her journey and the illness occasioned, and in his last letter he asks your father, as the greatest favour he ever granted, to lend him ten pounds, which I am quite sure, dear, good-hearted fellow ! were to assist poor Reynolds.”

“ Dear Charles ! ” said Isabella, adding a minute or two afterwards, “ and how is Reynolds now, mamma ? ”

“ Better ;—out of danger I believe, but still too ill to leave the sick-house.”

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Short as Isabella’s absence had been, there were nevertheless, a multitude of things to be seen and heard. Several seedling dabbias had exhibited their claims to share in the honours of their noble family ; the finest brood of late chickens that ever were hatched, were added to the treasures of the household, and a packet of new songs had been sent to Margaret, as a present from a lady at Taunton. Thus there was quite enough to make the morning pass rapidly away, without mentioning the discussion which followed the invitation to Oak Park for the morrow. How were they to go ? was the question. The car could take them, including the Misses Clark, if Mr. Worthington would drive ; but then the evenings were getting very short, and rather too cool for uncle David, Mrs. Worthington thought.

It was now that Isabella coloured painfully, and faltered in her speech,—

“ The carriage—I should think—that is, I should suppose ; but I don’t quite know about Mr. Wentworth’s notions respecting his horses ; but surely on such an occasion.”

“ My dear child,” said Colonel Seaton, interrupting her, and speaking with decision, “ you are very right not to undertake to answer for the horses and carriages, even of your husband ; for it is exactly the point on which all men choose to be masters ;

and do not let the question be made a difficult one on my account ; for you must excuse my coming to you, my dear girl. You know I have long given up visiting, Isabella, and it would harass me much, did I think you would make a point of my beginning again."

Had things been as Isabella once hoped they would, how coaxing, how ingenious, how irresistible would have been her endeavours to prove to the dear old man, that her house could never by possibility be considered by him as coming within the same rules and regulations as any other ; but, as it was, she was comforted, rather than distressed by his refusal, yet felt so pained by the consciousness that she was so, that she dared not trust her voice to speak, lest tears should follow any words she could utter.

Her mother noted her silence, and her sorrowful look, and fancied that she was hurt at Colonel Seaton's refusal ; but the old man noted it too, and understood her far better.

Happily for Isabella, the spirits of her mother and sister were too much excited, by having her again near them, by receiving a visit from her in the character which they had been so delighted to see her assume, and by the pleasure of accompanying her to Appleton, to make her drive thither a painful one in any way ; and had she been a little less pre-occupied, she would have shared their enjoyment in witnessing the effect which the arrival of her carriage produced in the little establishment.

The boy, who was gardener, shoe-cleaner, footman, and many an *alias* beside, was too entirely overcome by the splendour of the equipage, to permit his doing more than stare at it with open mouth for a minute, before he ran off to the kitchen-door to announce its arrival to his female fellow-servant.

"And who have ushered 'em in ?" cried the woman, in great agitation. "You dirty villain, you, why haven't you got your jacket on ?"

"And I cleaning the knives, Molly ! How can you speak so ? but nobody seed I, so you need not fret for that ; for I run away straight to tell you. So you be in time to open the door yourself."

"Me, you ragamuffin ! Me open the door in this trim ? Don't you see my hands, you villain, and my apron, and my cap ? I like your impudence."

A violent ring at the house-door made both the parties start, as if a pistol had been fired in the narrow space between them.

"Go, you lubbard, can't you !" vociferated the agitated maid-of-all-work.

"Catch me showing my face to Mr. Wentworth's coachman in this fashion," responded the rebellious urchin, darting forth

to the garden in a direction exactly contrary to that in which his presence was requested.

The ringing having been twice repeated without producing any effect, Mr. Worthington began to suspect the real state of the case; and descending from his elevated position, he showed a laughing face at the carriage-window, stating his suspicions, and advising the ladies to get out, and take possession of the well-known premises by storm.

They immediately followed his advice; and Margaret, running round to Miss Christina's own particular window, roused her from a profound meditation on the superiority of the feminine intellect by rapping sharply against the glass, and shouting aloud, "Isabella is here, aunt Margaret—and nobody will let us in."

"Isabella is here!" echoed the learned Christina.

"Isabella here?" re-echoed the affectionate Lucy; and speedily both were in full trot to perform the office which the recusant domestics had declined.

Both the spinsters were most sincerely rejoiced at seeing Isabella; but there was a notable difference in their manner of showing it. Miss Christina was too late to evince the zeal of her welcome by opening the house-door herself; for that had been done by Miss Lucy before the elder sister had well cleared the *chevaux de frise* of dictionaries, encyclopædias, and statistical tables by which her chair was always surrounded; but she threw wide that of the parlour, stationing her diminutive person exactly in the centre of the aperture; and when, at length, Mrs. Wentworth was released from the long, fond hug of her younger aunt, the elder received her with a profound curtsy.

"Don't curtsy to me, dear aunt!" cried Isabella, laughing; and putting aside, as it were, the fence of her formal little arms so stiffly crossed before her, she embraced her affectionately.

"Do not think me wanting in love, Mrs. Wentworth, because my inclination leads me to testify respect, where my judgment tells me it is due. You are no longer Isabella Worthington; but, young and childish as you appear, you are Mrs. Wentworth of Oak Park. That you are so, my dear, gives rise to many very important reflections, all bearing directly upon the great subject to the development of which my life is devoted. Did not the silly, unmeaning, immoral, and every way pernicious system exist, by which men, invariably, and with no attention to all the infinite varieties of character, circumstance, accident, and position which render every individual case subject, in the eye of common sense, to individual regulations—were it not for the system, I say, by which men are invariably permitted to choose, instead of being chosen, it is probable, my dear, that this strange

anomaly would have been avoided, and the lady at the head of the Wentworth establishment would not have looked so very young, and so very little dignified as you do."

Mr. Worthington, who was as happy as man could be, in seeing his darling child surrounded by splendour, yet still near to him, showed his gay spirits by a burst of hearty laughter.

"But how do you know, Christina, that, even if all things were going on according to your admirable system,—how do you know that Isabella would not have made Mr. Wentworth a proposal of marriage herself?" said he.

"Nonsense, brother Worthington! Isabella was the last girl in the world who would have thought of so ambitious a proposal. Depend upon it, the choice would have been made by a lady better calculated to value the advantages gained by it. But let us sit down. Pray, Mrs. Wentworth, do not stand in that cold draught of air. I wish, sister Lucy, you could contrive to keep your sewing-work in smaller compass; there is positively no room on the sofa for Mrs. Wentworth, to say nothing of my sister Worthington."

"Let me sit here!" said Isabella, placing herself upon a *tabouret* at the corner of the sofa. "This was always my place, aunt Lucy—was it not?"

"Yes, dearest; and often may it be your place again; for the greatest happiness I have had of late years has been having you there talking to me about my work, and helping me with your pretty taste about my colours: and I want you now more than ever, my dear, for I cannot make up my mind whether this little girl's bonnet should have red ribbons or blue. Isn't she natural, Isabella? with her pretty little feet, one shoe on, and the other off, you see; of course, you know it is for you, my dear; and if you *should* put it in the drawing-room, I do think it would be the proudest day of my life."

"Dearest aunt Lucy!" said Isabella, kissing her; "it will most certainly be placed in the drawing-room, and be quite sure that no article of furniture in it will be half so much valued by me."

"Dear creature!" exclaimed the delighted aunt, while her eyes glistened with happy emotion. "Thank God! there is no change in her, sister Margaret; she is the same sweet soul as ever."

"No change in me," thought Isabella. "Let me, too, thank God that they do not see it!"

"Sister Lucy! sister Lucy! pray be careful not to increase the greatest fault that Mrs. Wentworth has. *Pray* do not praise her for not showing any symptoms of change in a situation so very different from what she has been used to. In

the first place, it must be affectation; and in the second, it is, I must say, perfectly indecent and improper."

Mr. Worthington looked as if he were much inclined to laugh again; but he did not, and only said, with great decorum of manner, "My dear Miss Christina, do you really think that my daughter Wentworth ought to leave off loving us, because she is become mistress of Oak Park?"

"I have said nothing at all approaching it, Mr. Worthington," replied the lady, placing herself at the edge of her chair in a sort of logical and demonstrative attitude. "You lose sight of all ratiocination, my dear sir. Dr. Whately, if you would study him as I do, would soon teach you to avoid bringing forward so decided a *non sequitur*. Mrs. Wentworth may surely assume the dignity of manner befitting her new station without ceasing to love and honour her kindred. I, for one, my dear niece," she continued, turning to Isabella with the most obliging smile that her lips could produce—"I, for one, have great reason to feel anxious that the nepotine tenderness you have heretofore manifested towards me should in no degree lessen or deteriorate; for, assuredly, beyond any other of your relatives, I shall have need to put it to the test."

Isabella replied only by a kind smile. Though she had ventured to promise that her aunt Lucy's screen should stand in her drawing-room, she was far from feeling much confidence in the power that might be left her to oblige anybody, and moreover suspected that her aunt Christina, notwithstanding all her respect for her new dignity, might be very likely to propose what a more powerful bride than herself might find it difficult to obtain; so, to change the shape which the philosophical little lady's discourse seemed taking, she turned rather abruptly towards her sister, saying,—

"You have not yet told me, Margaret, if you have been to any balls since I left you?"

"Only one. The Bakers gave a delightful dance."

"And your partners, Margaret? Was Mr. Chivers there?"

"No, I believe not; but I really am not quite sure. I know, however, that I did not dance with him."

"And whom did you dance with?"

"Oh! several. Frederic Norris was one of them."

"Frederic Norris?" repeated Isabella, musingly. "Pray, Margaret, is not that the gentleman whose eyes and teeth I once heard you laud to the skies?"—and, notwithstanding the gaiety with which she spoke, her heart was heavy, as she remembered the rapid and most lamentable change which had taken place in her own feelings since this discussion on eyes and teeth.

Margaret stammered a little, and blushed a good deal, as she answered, "No, I believe not—that is, I don't remember what I said;" and, as Isabella smiled rather archly as she listened to her, she was greatly relieved by Miss Christina's forcing Mrs. Wentworth's attention back to herself, by saying, with some bitterness,—

"On one point, at least, niece Wentworth, I conceive there might be a change that none could object to. It would surely be better that you should cease to amuse yourself and your sister by discussing the comeliness of young gentlemen."

"The question is past discussion, aunt; it is a settled point, is it not, Margaret?" said Isabella, rallying to shake off her own gloomy thoughts.

"At any rate, my dear, it can be of no importance to you; therefore let me beg you to listen to what I was about to say. I presume that Mr. Wentworth means to attend his duty in Parliament as soon as the session begins?"

The house in town, the *duc de B—*, the saloon of Mrs. Clifton Darville, all painfully rushed into the mind of Isabella, as she listened to this question, and she changed colour as she answered, "I have not heard Mr. Wentworth say anything about it lately."

"We must, however, take it for granted," said Miss Clark, laying her hand upon the arm of Mr. Worthington, who seemed about to speak. "I beg your pardon, brother Worthington—but this is a subject too important to be lightly set aside. Will you excuse me, my dear Mrs. Wentworth, if I take the liberty of asking when you think it likely I may have the advantage of seeing Mr. Wentworth?"

Delighted to have so agreeable an answer to give, Isabella eagerly replied, "One part of my business here to-day is to ask you both, dear aunts, to come and dine at Oak Park to-morrow. I hope you have no engagement?"

"None in the world, Mrs. Wentworth—none in the world, my dear. This is very fortunate indeed! Dear me! I must take care to get ready. At what time do you dine, my dear?"

"At six, I believe; but we only came home yesterday, so I hardly know."

"By consulting her own choice of a dinner-hour, I presume Mrs. Wentworth would be able, with the greatest certainty, to ascertain that of Oak Park," said Mr. Worthington, bowing to his married daughter with much solemnity.

Isabella laughed slightly, and blushed almost painfully, as she replied, "No, indeed, papa; I have no inclination whatever to change the hours at Oak Park."

"That is perfectly amiable on your part," replied her father,

again bowing low; "but, at least, fair lady, you will not insist upon our doubting your power to do so."

"I shall have a great deal to do," muttered Miss Christina, as if speaking to herself—"the tables—the essay—the calculation—and the algebraic equation on the whole result. Would it make any difference to you, Mrs. Wentworth," she added, raising her voice, "if we come to dine with you on Friday instead of to-morrow?"

"*Would it make any difference!*" Isabella fancied she saw her husband's countenance at hearing such a free and easy proposal. "Why, I think, dear aunt," she replied, with as much composure as she could command, "that, as all the party at Abbot's Preston are engaged to us for to-morrow, we had better not change the day."

"It would make no difference to us, my dear, I dare say," said her good-natured mother, who was always ready to comply with her eldest sister's whims when it was possible to do so. "I trust our dining at Oak Park will never be a very ceremonious business; so one day will do as well as another for it."

"I rather think Mr. Wentworth would prefer to-morrow," said Isabella, timidly.

"Nay, then, to-morrow it must be," said Mr. Worthington; "so you must postpone some of your learned studies till after the visit, sister Christina."

"Excuse me, brother Worthington; but your usual acuteness is, in the present instance, at fault: you know not what you say. To postpone till after the visit the arrangement of the subjects which must be discussed in the course of it would show but little wisdom," replied Miss Clark. "However," she added, "I hope the delay thus occasioned will not be of many days; and, indeed, the merely opening the subject of so vast a field of discussion may suffice for our first visit. To-morrow, then, Mrs. Wentworth, we will wait upon you without fail; and I beg to assure Mr. Wentworth, from myself particularly, that the warmth and eagerness with which he appears to seek my society confirms all my most agreeable anticipations; and I trust our near affinity, and our near neighbourhood, together, will enable us to assist each other in our pursuit of the public good. I have never forgotten the superiority of his manners at the party where I first met him."

Isabella trembled at the difficulties and dangers which she saw opening before her; and her kind heart sunk within her as she thought of the mortification and disappointment that awaited her family. Not only was it evident that the half-cracked Christina looked forward to Oak Park as a second Abbot's Preston, but it was equally so that her father and mother did so likewise. And



what could be more natural than that they should do so?—or what more certain than that they would be disappointed?

Sad and sick at heart Isabella sat in the midst of them, the centre, as they fondly imagined, of all their joys, yet conscious herself that a blight hung upon her which sooner or later must spread among them all.

"You have not told me, my dear, about the colour of my little maid's ribbons," said Miss Lucy, taking her frame upon her knee, and turning the elaborate performance it contained towards the eyes of her niece. "Do tell me, Isabella, which you like best, and then I shall go on with spirit."

"I think green would be very pretty, aunt Lucy," said Isabella, endeavouring to rouse herself.

"Green! my dearest child? Oh, Isabella! don't say green!" exclaimed Miss Lucy. "Don't you see, my dear, that it will come just in the very middle of the apple-tree, and how will it be possible to make any difference between the green ribbon and the green leaves. Do just look at the drawing, Isabella, and you will see in a minute."

"Very true, aunt Lucy. What was the colour you were thinking of yourself?"

"Let it be *couleur de rose*, whatever it is!" gaily exclaimed Mr. Worthington. "If it be for Isabella, that must be the most appropriate tint you could choose. Is it not?" he added, nodding his head to her, and smiling in her face with a look of perfect happiness.

"Oh! yes, rose-colour, aunt Lucy—rose-colour by all means," replied Mrs. Wentworth. "But I fear it is time to go home."

"It is but half-past four, Isabella," said Miss Lucy, looking at the old-fashioned timepiece which ornamented a pier-table. "Don't go yet! I have got two more drawings to show you, my dear. Of course, you must have footstools; and if these patterns don't please your fancy, you must positively tell me so. Look! here is a hutch with a little rabbit in it. Do look at the cabbage-leaf between the bars!—Isn't it quite perfect? And now look at this—I call it my glory of glories. I do think this cat, with the mouse between her paws, and that little pattypan of milk beside her, is the most beautiful thing that ever was drawn for work!"

"It is very pretty indeed!" replied Isabella. "But, my dear aunt Lucy, you are preparing to do too much for me—you will positively work your dear fingers to the bone."

"No, I sha'n't,—and I have ever so much lamb's-wool by me, of one colour or another; and I think I can bring them all in."

"I have brought you some worsteds from Paris, aunt Lucy,"

said Isabella, suddenly recollecting that this had been the result of her first morning's shopping there; "and plenty of your dearly-beloved white silk."

"No!—Is it possible? You don't know how happy you have made me, Isabella. That white silk part of the business has been hanging like a stone round my neck. It is so beautiful, but so very dear, you know!"

"Wilson had unpacked nothing when I came away this morning; but before you arrive to-morrow the parcel shall be ready for you. There are one or two little things," she added, looking round her, "to show that I did not quite forget any of you; but we set off from Paris rather sooner than I expected, or there would have been more of them."

"Dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Worthington, "not in the midst of your greatest and gayest splendour will you ever forget us. But I thought you came home sooner than you talked of, Isabella. How did this happen? Did Wentworth get impatient to install his fair sovereign in her own beautiful dominions?"

"I suppose so," said Isabella, again rising to go.

"But do tell us something about poor dear Mary Wilson," said Miss Lucy. "Does she answer, my dear? Do you think she will do for lady's own maid to one of your great fortune? I shall be so sorry if she does leave you."

"There is no danger of that, I think," replied Mrs. Wentworth. "I wish for no greater accomplishments than she possesses."

"But, Isabella," began her mother, "I wish you would not be in such a hurry; we have fifty things——"

"Dear, dear mamma!" she replied, now looking very much in earnest, "I do assure you I wish to go now; it is quite a long drive, you know, round by Abbot's Preston. Good-bye, aunt Christina—good bye, aunt Lucy."

"Oh! I quite forgot the drive round," said Mrs. Worthington, at length rising from her seat. "But you are never very long dressing, Isabella."

Isabella glanced at the timepiece, and changed colour, as she perceived that it was past five; but still there were adieux to be made, and an hour fixed for their joining company for the expedition of the morrow, yet Mrs. Wentworth, though really terrified at the probable consequences of her being too late, could neither precede the party to her carriage, nor utter one syllable that could effectually accelerate their lingering movements by communicating any portion of the anxiety which impelled her own.

At length, however, they were all once more in and on the

carriage, Mr. Worthington sharing the coach-box, and giving vent to the gaiety of his heart by sitting in such an attitude as might enable him to chat with those within. Both the front glasses were down to facilitate this communication, and the result of it was hearty and repeated laughter on the part of Margaret, as her father indulged his happy spirits in some ludicrous anticipations as to the various modes in which Charles was likely to use the privilege of being brother-in-law to Oak Park.

Exactly at the moment when this mirth was at its *acmé*, Isabella perceived her husband and his groom advancing at a brisk trot to meet them. She had drawn herself back into the corner of the carriage, to hide herself, as it were, from the merry peal that rang so ominously in her ears, foretelling the gloom and disappointment that must follow after it, so that Mr. Wentworth as he approached, saw only his father, mother, and sister in law in possession of the equipage.

"Here's Mr. Wentworth!" exclaimed Margaret, upon which Mr. Worthington turned himself round, and perceived his elegant son-in-law in the act of drawing up his rein, and making a signal to his coachman to stop.

"Welcome home, my dear Wentworth!" said the worthy rector, hazarding a fall from his high seat, by leaning from it for the purpose of shaking hands.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" said Mr. Wentworth, skilfully curbing his high-mettled steed, while seeming daintily and helplessly to yield himself to its caprices; "but my mare is too restless."

"Well, never mind, my dear fellow, we shall meet soon, and often, I trust, where no prancing jade shall check our friendly greeting."

"Pray is Mrs. Wentworth with you?" said the graceful horseman, bowing slightly, in acknowledgment of the affectionate prediction.

"Here she is to answer for herself," said Mrs. Worthington, who had been vainly smiling and kissing her hand, from the moment Mr. Wentworth had appeared.

Isabella, thus called upon, leaned from the side window, and said, "I hope it is not very late, Wentworth?"

The master of the now docile mare drew his watch from his waistcoat-pocket, and holding it at the length of its chain, showed her silently the hour. For an instant she raised her eyes to his face; and though the features were quite unmoved in their symmetrical regularity, her eye had already learnt to understand the slight rigidity which denoted ill-humour.

"I had no idea it was so late!" she said, colouring. "Had you not better let us drive on, Marmaduke? I will set them down, and can drive home by Driford Lane; the road is very good at this season."

"Go on to Mr. Worthington's parsonage, Richard," said Mr. Wentworth, "and then turn and drive home by the high road." He then lifted his hat very gracefully from his head, backed his horse a step or two, and the carriage passed him.

"How very handsome Mr. Wentworth looks on horseback!" said Margaret.

"Most graceful and dignified indeed!" said her mother. "Nobody will suspect you, Isabella, of having married for money; for, to be sure, any woman in the world might be in love with him."

"He was not displeased, was he, my dear, at seeing us all driving about with you? I am afraid he thinks we have kept you too late. Is he very particular about his dinner-hour, Isabella?" said her father.

"I believe he is very desirous that the servants should be regular in everything," she replied.

"Oh! that's it, is it? He is quite right; I like him the better for it. Good conduct cannot exist in any station of life without order and regularity. But I hope he is not really vexed? Do you think he is?"

"Pray do not suppose so," said Isabella, evasively. "I am not above half an hour later than I ought to be."

"Well, well, we must take care another time: I promise you I shall not encourage your running counter to so very excellent a regulation—but it was not your fault; it was all owing to aunt Lucy and her stitching."

They now reached the rectory gate, when it was decided they should not drive in; a hasty kiss was given by each to the beautiful mistress of Oak Park, and she was driven away to her splendid home.

On reaching it she saw nothing of Mr. Wentworth, and hastening to her dressing-room, so rapidly despatched the business of the toilet, that she reached the drawing-room by ten minutes past six.

Mr. Wentworth was standing with the bell-rope in his hand when she entered, and the butler, as it seemed, was waiting outside the door in readiness to answer it, for he appeared the instant it was pulled.

"Bring dinner!" were the only words pronounced, and then Mr. Wentworth took up the newspaper.

"Is there any news to-day, Marmaduke?" said his young

wife, determined not to take it for granted that she was in disgrace for being ten minutes too late for dinner.

He did not raise his eyes from the paper immediately ; but presently, having occasion to turn the page, he looked very demurely at her, and said,—

“ Did you speak ? ”

“ I asked if there were any news, Marmaduke.”

He was standing at the window, for the light was fading ; but upon her saying this, he walked across the room, and placed the paper on the table that stood before her sofa.

“ What shall I say next ? ” thought Isabella. But the next moment brought her relief, for the dinner was announced.

Mr. Wentworth then approached her, and with the most graceful politeness presented his arm ; in passing through the billiard-room, which divided the drawing and dining rooms, he spoke not, but as soon as they were seated at table with their three attendant servants about them, everything that could be uttered demonstrative of attention at table, was addressed by the gentleman to the lady ; and being received and answered on her part with the sweetest good-humour and cheerfulness, all things seemed right again, and she even ventured to tell him that all the party she had invited, excepting her uncle David, had accepted the invitation she had conveyed to them.

“ I am glad to hear it, my love,” he replied very graciously. “ Philip,” turning to the man behind his chair, “ let Mrs. Oldfield know that the party mentioned by her mistress this morning will dine here to-morrow,” adding with a nod to the butler, “ There will be seven at table.”

When the servants left the room, however, all inclination for conversation seemed to leave it with them, and Isabella ate her grapes in silence. This continued unbroken till he said, “ Do you take any more wine, Isabella ? ”

“ No more, I thank you,” was the reply, but she had still three more grapes to eat, and when he had attentively watched till those had been despatched, he spoke again. “ Do you make a habit of sitting long after dinner, Mrs. Wentworth ? ”

“ Oh, no ! I am quite ready to go,” she replied, rising, upon which he darted to the door ; and having opened it for her, bowed gravely as she passed.

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When moralists, religionists, and philosophers of all sorts set about reasoning on the phenomena of the world we live in, and contemplating the mass of human misery to be found therein, trace it to all the fearful crimes that since the fall of man have found their way into the heart, they overlook one little cause of suffering, which blights more happiness, and neutralizes a greater

portion of God's bounteous favours, than all the other heinous enormities of our depraved race put together. This hateful, stealthy, heart-destroying blight is often found where everything like atrocious vice is utterly unknown, and where many of the very highest virtues flourish. Probity, liberality, temperance, observant piety, may all exist with a sour temper; yet many a human being has been hung in chains, whose justly punished deeds have not caused one-hundredth part the pain to his fellow-men which a cross temperament is sure to give. How often has a bright sunny day risen upon a healthy, prosperous, gay-spirited race, each hour of which,

"Though blessed with all that Heaven can send,"

has been poisoned, mildewed, and rendered hateful to every member of it, by the habitual ill-humour of its head. Yet all the reprobation cast on such a one, is summed up in the gentle phrases, "He is a tiresome man," or, "She has a disagreeable temper, poor woman!" Fulminate your bolts, ye moral teachers, against the unschooled self-indulgence that generates this domestic curse! Let men see, as in a glass, the hideous contrast between their crooked, crabbed natures, and the sweet image of Him who taught the doctrine of perfect love! Do this, and your preaching may not be in vain.

\* \* \* \* \*

Isabella walked slowly onward through the noble billiard-room to the well-lit, many-mirrored, richly-draped drawing-room, and seating herself on a low chair beside the fire, had much ado not to weep in the midst of her splendour.

"This will never do!" thought she. "Surely I am a fool to feel so very miserable because my husband looks grave. He loves me passionately; he is generous, polite, handsome, intellectual, and shall I break my heart because he is not always as gay as my young brother Charles, or quite as sweet-tempered as my uncle David, or my own dear father? I am wrong, very wrong, and shall grow positively wicked if I don't take care. Where is my work-box—dear Margaret's pretty present? But no, that will not do just now. I think I'll read;" and going to a circular table, round which were ranged as a border, a miniature set of British poets, she took the first her hand touched, and felt she had drawn a prize, when she perceived it was a volume of Spenser.

With a good deal of virtuous moral energy, she determined to make herself very happy and comfortable—drew a little table towards the sofa, placed a pair of shaded wax-lights upon it, arranged a foot-stool, and then opening her book, she read—

" Oft when my spirit doth spread her bolder wings  
In mind to mount up to the purest sky,  
It down is weigh'd with thought of earthly things,  
And clogg'd with burden of humanity."

" Alas ! alas ! and so it is with me," thought Isabella ; " the pure sky I aim at, is the quiet region of peace ; but who shall say how many of the earthly things that weigh me down arise within myself ? I will do battle with my rebellious temper, and cease to bemoan myself every time the generous being who has chosen me from out the world, shall chance to look more grave than I would wish him to do. Dear Marmaduke ! you shall come and find me the docile and contented wife you so well deserve to have."

But Marmaduke did not come, and Isabella read and read, till at last the door opened, a servant entered, and a silver waiter was presented to her, on which lay a neatly folded letter.

The man retired without raising his eyes to the face of his mistress,—a forbearance which might fairly be attributed to amiable feeling on the part of the good Philip,—for he had lived several years with his master, and during some part of each had been accustomed to his method of proceeding whenever it happened (which, to say the truth, was pretty frequently) that he quarrelled with his mother. On all such occasions he was accustomed to write her letters, which in the servant's hall were designated " papers," and the frequent phrase, " Master has been sending another paper to the old duchess," was invariably understood to announce a state of warfare between the higher powers.

It was not without something like a pang at his heart, that the experienced valet delivered to Wilson the letter Isabella received from Mr. Wentworth at Paris. " Oh, Mrs. Wilson ! he is beginning with his papers already ! " were the words which accompanied it, which, though to the uninitiated Wilson they expressed little, were in fact pregnant with most ominous forebodings. It may easily be supposed that this second despatch confirmed them all ; and if a very honest feeling of pity on the part of the messenger could have softened the contents of the packet, it might have cut less deeply into the young heart to which it was addressed.

Isabella turned pale as she opened it : but there was no kind eye to look at her ; and it was with herself alone that she had to hold counsel on the best manner of replying to the following lines :—

" Nothing, perhaps, is more repugnant to the habitual refinement of a gentleman, my dear Isabella, than the necessity of finding fault with any one,—and you may easily believe that this repugnance to a duty, always so dangerous in its execution to the polished elegance of a person of fashion, must be greatly in-

creased when the object is a young and beautiful woman. I have already hinted to you that I cannot but anticipate from a young person whose early years have passed as yours have done, many defects and deficiencies which it will be my painful but necessary duty both to notice and to reform. To do so by words addressed to yourself, which, however carefully modified, might possibly be displeasing, would require a degree of harshness totally at variance with my manners and my principles. It is by the pen, therefore, my love, that I shall utter such truths as it is necessary for you to learn, and I trust to the good principles inculcated by your respectable parents (as I have before told you) as a guarantee for your receiving them without permitting your temper to be in any degree irritated thereby, or suffering the tender love I have a right to expect from you to be chilled or lessened by the pain it may be occasionally my duty to inflict. Among the many blessings for which you have to be thankful, Isabella, it is not perhaps the least that you are sure never to be wounded, however great the provocation, by anything approaching to ungentlemanlike language. This is, I am certain, impossible; and it will be in the most temperate terms I can select that I shall animadvert on the strange events of to-day.

"I cannot but lament, my love, that you should have reached your present age and great perfection of womanly beauty without ever having had an opportunity of acquiring an idea of the use and purposes for which people of fashion charge themselves with the trouble and expense of keeping private carriages. But for this unfortunate ignorance on your part,—and I really must add on that of your family also,—I should have this day been spared the contemplation of a spectacle at once the most incongruous and disgusting.

"I have no words, Isabella, to describe the painful astonishment of my feelings at meeting my own equipage, built at the most expensive and fashionable repository in London, with horses and caparisons of the first cost and style, the whole turn-out, liveries, harness, and all as finished and as elegant as art and taste could make them. I cannot, I say, express the dismay and astonishment with which I perceived that this equipage was made to assume the appearance and perform the office of a stage-coach. Of course, my dear, I am aware that one or two among our men of fashion have indulged the merry whim of having among their various carriages one that elegantly mimics the outward form and seeming of a public conveyance; and I am inclined to believe that you may have heard of this, and that some notion of such a caprice having been considered as among the licensed vagaries of fashion, may have occasioned the tremendous exhibition of this morning. But if this be so, my dearest Isabella, think for an instant with all the power of reflection which your young mind can exercise,—think, I say, how immensely important it is, that, being most unexpectedly placed in a situation giving you a right to follow where the highest order of fashion leads, you should learn to know how this upward and slippery path may be followed in safety! It is here, my love, that you will indeed want a sustaining hand, and no woman ever bound herself to obey one more ready to extend it than myself. Observe, in the present instance, what the want of such a guide has led you to. When a man of fashion indulges in the eccentricity to which I have alluded, he orders a carriage to be built expressly for the purpose, and with three or four servants placed outside of it, drives a friend beside him on the coach-box into Hyde Park for the sake of enjoying the stare that will follow them. But can you fancy a party of ladies taking part in such a frolic? Can you imagine that *any* one would occupy the interior of such a machine? Merciful Heaven! When I think of the spectacle of this morning, my feelings become almost too painful to bear! Can I ever forget the close-packed female heads protruded, amidst unseemly bursts of laughter, to enjoy the waggeries of the outside passenger who sat beside the coachman! I must not think of it—indeed I must not, if I have any hope of retaining towards you the feelings from which I have expected to derive the chief happiness of my life. Let the subject drop into eternal oblivion. No excuses, no apologies can lessen the agony with which I think of it; and you should be grateful to the affection which leads me to insist upon its never being mentioned more. The only consolation I could receive I have already drawn from my coachman, who assures me positively that the carriage, thus frightfully metamorphosed, was seen by no one but a gaping rustic or two who took their hats off to the liveries, probably without being at all aware of the manner in which they were disgraced.

"Before I close this communication—which, remember, is in no way to be referred to when we meet—I must call your attention, my dear, to another point,



on which you have been guilty of a gross violation (pardon the strength of the phrase in favour of its justice) of duty and propriety. I allude to the lateness of the hour at which you returned to your mansion. There is a rude want of observance in this to which I have been little accustomed, and I shall hope never to be exposed to it again.

"Lay this affectionate counsel to your heart, my Isabella, and feel as you ought to do the blessing of being united to a husband who not only is capable of correcting in you every fault of education and habit of which he may have reason to complain, but who thus sedulously guards you from the mortification of hearing your faults commented upon. Prove to me that you thus feel and know how to appreciate my delicacy and kindness, by letting me see you when we meet at the hour of coffee as sweetly serene and as tenderly affectionate as I wish.

"I am, my beloved Isabella,

"Your ever affectionate husband,

"MARMADUKE WENTWORTH.

"P.S. I wish that all my letters to you should be preserved."

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Had Isabella's new-born philosophy strength enough to help her to get through this letter with meekness and resignation? Scarcely: but it made a stand that enabled her to check her propensity to weep. She could not honestly have repeated the words, "Dear Marmaduke!" as she had coaxed herself to utter them an hour before; but she determined, as nearly as her true nature would let her, to take the tone he dictated, and really did feel thankful that, if such communications were to make part of her destiny, they were not to be discussed afterwards.

Isabella looked at the timepiece. The hour of coffee was already come; so she quietly folded up the letter and deposited it in the drawer of the table before her, of which she reverently put the key in her pocket, and then returning to the sweet love-making of Spenser's delicious sonnets, strove with all her power to forget that all such visions of future happiness as he fondly dwells upon, and of which her dreams, too, had been made up a few short weeks before, had vanished for ever from her hopes!

In less than a quarter of an hour her husband appeared. His countenance had an expression which she began to understand, but which might have puzzled a physiognomist. It was tranquil, smooth, and all but benign in its serenity; but she still read restraint and stiffness there. However, he stalked with long and rapid strides towards her, and held out his hand. She rose and took it; and so well had she schooled herself to bear with him, that had not his letter carried with it something like insult to her dear family, she would perhaps have had little difficulty in receiving him with all the real kindness that she wished to feel. But "*the waggeries of the outside passenger*" clung to her memory with very dangerous pertinacity; and when she would have smiled in reply to his civil question, "Are you ready for coffee, my love?" the effort was beyond her strength,

the tears rushed to her eyes, and, in answer to the gathering frown which instantly darkened his countenance, she exclaimed—

“O Marmaduke! I do so love my father!”

Nothing could be further from her intentions than this out-breaking of genuine feeling, it was quite contrary to her idea of what was right, it was inconsistent with every dictate of prudence; but her heart swelled, and the words burst forth against her will.

Well indeed might she tremble when she had uttered them, for his whole plan of operations being for the moment entirely overthrown, he felt as if he too might indulge himself; and once more the words, “Leave me, madam! leave me, if you please!” sounded in her ears.

But this time no thought of momentary release for herself made her hasten to obey it: she remembered at the instant that her family were to assemble round her on the morrow; and the fear that now seized upon her was lest all their joy should be turned to mourning by finding her on bad terms with her husband.

“Forgive me, Marmaduke! forgive me!” she cried, timidly seizing his hand and pressing it to her lips; “I did not mean to offend you.”

“Not mean to offend me!” he replied sternly enough; but he did not withdraw his hand. She was so beautiful in the humility of her penitence, and that humility was the mood he so dearly loved, that he condescended to bend forward his lofty head and kiss her forehead.

“Do not abuse my excessive tenderness, Isabella!” he said; “but henceforward receive all I say to you as you ought to do. You are forgiven!” and again he kissed her.

The gentleness of woman’s love is very great; but it is not her only feeling: she is as susceptible of the pain produced from outraged pride as the stoutest and haughtiest of her masters, and Mr. Wentworth erred in thinking his caresses could heal the wound he had given. Isabella would far rather that he had not kissed her

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## CHAPTER XIV.

THERE was one peculiarity in the temper of Mr. Wentworth, which would have been tormenting to any one, but was especially so to Isabella, from being diametrically the reverse of her own. Deeply as her young love had been wounded to its very source and centre,—for her heart, her conscience, her judgment, no

longer recognized any superiority in her husband but that of power,—deeply as this rapid and melancholy change had worked its way, there was still left a feeling of gratified vanity, and of obligation, which, on her part, led to kindness. In each one, therefore, of the rough passages that had already occurred between them, his mode of concluding the scene, by according a formal forgiveness, might have sufficed (had she been the only party concerned) to have thrown it into perfect oblivion; but it was evident that, with him, the case was otherwise. It was not that, when the breakfast of the following morning again placed them opposite to each other, he made any reference in his conversation to what had passed; on the contrary, he most scrupulously, and as it were laboriously, avoided it. But not to perceive that the subject and the offence were still on his mind, was impossible. It may seem like a paradox to say that this lingering *morgue* was not occasioned by any hardness of temper, but the contrary; yet so it was. On no occasion did Mr. Wentworth ever acknowledge to himself that **HE WAS WRONG**. Nevertheless, truth would have her right; and if she could not wring *this* from his stubborn self-approval, she contrived, in spite of him, to produce a sort of gnawing unrest, of which, if called upon to explain it, he would have said, and with great sincerity, *that he thought he had been unkindly and unworthily treated, and that the remembrance of it made him sad.*

Had Isabella fully understood this, the genuine sweetness of her disposition would have led her to meet this kind of bastard self-reproach in such a manner as to heal the wounds it made; but as it invariably gave to his manner the appearance of grave coldness and restraint towards herself, her only resource seemed to be in patient endurance, which in her was so genuine, so gentle, so free from every shadow of affectation, that, perforce, he loved her for it. And thus it happened, that she, who was guiltless in word and thought, gradually became, in spite of all her efforts to prevent it, that reprobated thing, *a woman who does not love her husband*; while he, though often persuading himself that he ought to love her less, daily felt his admiration and esteem for her increase.

But this is rather forestalling.

Notwithstanding the chilling effect of Mr. Wentworth's manner, Isabella ventured, before she left the breakfast-table the next morning, to speak of the expected visit of her family, and to ask him "which drawing-room he would have lighted." It was a happy question, as it enabled him to indulge at once in two of his strongest propensities—ostentation, and the profession of the contrary; and it certainly did more towards restoring his good-humour than anything else she could have said.

"I would wish you, my dear Mrs. Wentworth, in this, as in everything else, I am sure, to consult your own wishes; but, as a matter of opinion, I am inclined to say, that I think it would be more judicious to use the great room. For myself, I so heartily hate and despise everything like display and parade, that I should assuredly vote for making no difference whatever, and receiving them in our common sitting-room; but, though I am averse to dwell upon it, I am aware of the necessity of giving your family every consequence in my power, even in the eyes of my servants; this is important; and, moreover, the sort of respect shown by the use of this apartment, may be gratifying to the party we expect; a consideration to which, I must beg you to believe, I shall never be indifferent."

Of course it was the duty of Isabella to say, "You are very kind," and as she was quite willing to believe that such was his intention, she did say it; but how willingly would she have given up the privilege of using her great drawing-room for ever, could she thereby have made him feel, as she did, that no demonstration of ceremony could be welcome between him and them! That this, however, could never, never be, she already knew with a sort of instinctive certainty, a thousand times stronger than the most veracious assurance ever produced.

But she had, however, the satisfaction of perceiving that her question, and the train of thought it opened, were operating very favourably upon the temper, or, as she would have kindly called it, the nerves of her husband. He looked relieved, animated, and almost happy.

"I think, my love, that it may be as well to have the library lighted too," he said, after meditating upon the subject for some minutes. "Your father may feel this as a compliment to himself."

"I shall be very glad to have the library opened, Marmaduke," replied his wife; "for if papa should not think much about it, there is one, I assure you, who will."

"And who is that, dearest—your fair self?"

"Oh, no! I could go into it, you know, at any time; but I was thinking of my aunt Christina. Do you know, Marmaduke, that she is a very literary lady—quite a blue-stockings, and an authoress?"

Mr. Wentworth raised his arched eyebrows with an expression that made Isabella smile.

"Shall you be very much afraid of her?" said she.

"No, I hope not," he replied; "but we must take care my mother never sees her. You have no idea of the intensity of her horror when she hears of that sort of thing."

"When may we expect Mrs. Wentworth, Marmaduke?"

"Towards the end of the week, I hope. I long for her arrival.

She has not yet seen either of the newly-furnished rooms, and till she shall have passed judgment on them, I cannot feel satisfied that they are right. Her taste is absolutely perfect."

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At a quarter before six precisely, the Abbot's Preston car arrived, laden, as Mr. Wentworth would have called it, with the rector, four ladies, and the rectory man-of-all-work. There was something of painful incongruity in the appearance of the four ladies with their bonnets on, as they were ushered by a double file of servants from their simple carriage to the splendid drawing-room.

"Dearest Isabella! You are dressed already, I see," said Mrs. Worthington, as she embraced her: "but we must all ask leave to mount to your apartment before we can be fit to make our appearance here."

Rejoiced at heart that Mr. Wentworth had not left his dressing-room, Isabella, after a hasty embrace to each, hurried forward to lead them up stairs, and happily accomplished their passage across the hall before the master of the house appeared. Once safely ensconced within her own premises, she enjoyed, for a few short moments, the delight of seeing them all around her without restraint. Her mother was in raptures at the elegance of the whole apartment. Her aunt Lucy eulogized the rose-wood work-table in the boudoir; Margaret, the pretty well-filled bookshelves; and Miss Clark the supreme luxury of a writing-table, wax-lights, and fire-screen, all in one.

"And where is Wilson?" said Miss Lucy; "pray let us see poor dear Mary. It will be worth a guinea to see her happiness among all this grandeur."

"May I ring the bell for her, Isabella?" said Margaret; "I know she will be delighted to see us."

The bell was rung, and immediately answered by Wilson, who did indeed seem very glad to see them; but yet showed less satisfaction at being transplanted to this region of elegance than they expected.

"I do believe she has got too much used to these fine things already to care much about them," said Miss Lucy, adding, with a good-humoured smile, "are you not very, very happy, Mary?"

"O, yes; certainly, ma'am," replied the girl, colouring. "Shall I do your hair for you, Miss Margaret?"

"Mary Wilson, you are spoiled, I do declare!" said Miss Lucy. "I thought we should have seen you out of your wits with joy and gladness."

"I must learn to be steady and servant-like in my manners, now, Miss Lucy; it would not be proper in me to show just everything I feel," replied Wilson.

"And what did you think of Paris, Mary? Were you as much delighted with it as your mistress?" said Mrs. Worthington, referring to Isabella's first happy letter.

"I don't know, ma'am," said Wilson, busying herself with Margaret's beautiful hair. "It is a very fine place, I believe."

"You will be too late, dear creatures!" cried Isabella, in a voice of real alarm, on hearing a clock strike six. "I must not let you talk any more. You look very nice, aunt Lucy. Come, dear Margaret; come, mamma. Aunt Christina! are you going to dine upon my little library?"

"Not so, my dear, I do assure you," replied the learned lady; "the diet would be too light and frothy for my appetite. You have neither Malthus nor Martineau!"

Having at length safely conveyed her party to the drawing-room again, Isabella had the satisfaction of seeing that, though it was at least three minutes past six o'clock, her husband received the ladies of her family very graciously; and certainly nothing could be more graceful than his attitude and manner, as he stood upon the hearth-rug, before his mother-in-law, listening to her delighted encomiums on the decorations and furniture of the room, all of which had been renewed since she had seen it last.

Happily they neither of them had wearied of the theme when dinner was announced, and he handed her to the place at his right hand with an air of so much kindness, that the eyes of Isabella, who watched it all, sparkled with happiness.

The dinner was little short of magnificent; and the mistress of the feast was as much surprised at the mock turtle and *potage à la Megmerriles*, the turbot and salmon procured by express from Taunton, and all the other *et ceteras* of the ostentatious entertainment, as her guests could be. She sighed as she felt how little this was like a welcome to be often repeated; but no such idea occurred to the rest of the party. Mr. Worthington, indeed, laughed a little at his young daughter upon the subject, saying—

"Mr. Wentworth will be frightened, I suspect, at this your first specimen of ordering dinner, Isabella. You must consult your mamma a little, my dear, before you invite us again."

Isabella hardly knew how to answer, so she smiled, and looked at her husband.

"Oh! ho! it is his fault, is it?" said the rector, shaking his head at his son-in-law. "If it be meant for what we rustics call a house-warming, it is all very well, Wentworth; but for God's sake, don't treat us again in this grandee style."

The silver plateau had no monstrous pyramid of flowers to oblige one part of the company to play at bo-peep with the other,

so Isabella had no difficulty in tracing the effect of this new "waggery" upon her husband.

Angry constitutions, when others blush, turn pale; and while Mr. Wentworth was struggling to reply in such terms as should not disgrace his dignity, his face became almost perfectly colourless. Mr. Worthington, whose laughing eye was fixed upon him, perceived it with great alarm; and never dreaming that it was produced by any moral cause, exclaimed with affectionate vehemence, "My dear Wentworth, you are ill! For God's sake, what ails you?" And the good man rose from his chair to hasten to him.

"It is nothing, sir; nothing, I assure you," replied Mr. Wentworth, with a movement of his hand that seemed to beseech him to re-seat himself; and pouring out a glass of water, he drank it off as one might do who feels a faintness, but resolves to conquer it. All the ladies first looked at him and then at Isabella, to see how she bore the alarm. But there was, they all thought, a most extraordinary degree of philosophical composure in her beautiful eyes, as now, turned from her husband upon them, they seemed to observe, with something more like curiosity than alarm, what they thought about it.

Poor girl! she was a very unskilled hypocrite; and being at this moment relieved from great terror (for she saw that *for the time* the paroxysm was over), her spirits revived, and she was considerably gayer than before her husband had turned as pale as death.

He, too, was well pleased that he had so far mastered himself as not to destroy the effect he intended to produce on his new relatives. He had deliberately formed his plan on this head, and attached great importance to its success. His object was, to impress them all with so lofty an idea of his wealth, consequence, and immense superiority in all ways, as to render the reserve and distance which it was essential to his comfort to retain with them afterwards, a matter of no surprise. It was certainly his intention that the mind of his wife should be included in this process, which would not only prevent any active opposition on her part to the blockade which was to protect his lofty gates, but must of necessity produce also the desirable effect of displaying his exclusive love to herself to the greatest advantage.

The effort it was necessary for him to make in order that he might not destroy, by any untimely ebullition of anger, this wise and well-arranged system, was not made without difficulty; but it was one in which he was not unpractised; for his mother, even while she fostered the sour irritability which was the besetting vice of his character by every observance and every indulgence which a rich widowed mother has the dangerous power to

bestow, exacted in return sufficient decorum of manner before witnesses to prevent, as she said, his great qualities from being mixed up and adulterated in men's minds by the display of his only weakness. "I care little for your not being greatly beloved, Marmaduke," she said, after a lecture on this subject; "few persons so very highly gifted by nature and fortune as yourself escape such a degree of envy as is apt to canker affection—at least, such is the result of my personal experience; but I would rather see you in your grave, than pointed at as a man whose choleric temper could make him forget that he was a gentleman. I know my own temper to be violent, you know it too, my son; but did you ever see me condescend to let the spying eyes of ordinary human beings penetrate what was passing within me? Servants are but so many articles of animated furniture, made in some degree sentient for our use, and towards them it matters little how we bear ourselves; an extra gratuity will settle anything and everything with them. Therefore, respecting your attendants, I trust you to your own discretion, quite sure that you will learn after a few years not to give way to any degree of violence that shall give them too great an advantage over you. But towards such as, being admitted to our society, have in some sort a right to sit in judgment on us, restrain your vehemence, let the doing so cost you what it may; and soothe yourself under the effort by remembering that, in your station, you must perpetually find yourself in situations of sufficient superiority to license a freer expression of feeling."

This doctrine sank deep into the young man's mind, for it was congenial to it; vanity worked within him as strongly as choler, and for a time was often able to master it.

The dinner, therefore, proceeded with every appearance of the most elegant hospitality, and was not without its enjoyments to most of the party. Mrs. Worthington, good and pious Christian as she was, could not be quite insensible to the glory of sitting at such a table, as the mother of its mistress; and little tickling reminiscences of hints that she had listened to concerning young ladies of great county consequence, who it was thought possible might aspire to the place her Isabella now occupied, more than once caused furtive dimples to play about her handsome mouth. A sort of masculine modification of the same feeling was not wanting to increase the kind-hearted rector's pleasure at thus finding himself for the first time seated at a table spread for him by a darling child. Margaret, indeed, sighed a little, as she thought how very happy she could be under similar circumstances to those of her sister, but at the hundredth part of the cost. Miss Christina had her own gratifications; she was not displeased to show the butler and the three footmen how heartily



she despised all the dainties they offered to her acceptance—shook her head most expressively as each successive dish was presented at her elbow, occasionally asking for the “vegetables,” which formed the chief part of her philosophical regimen; and when the champagne was poured, sparkling to the brim of the glass, beside her, she was not sorry for the opportunity of pushing it from her with an air of deep moral distaste, saying as she did so, “For me? Oh! no.”

Miss Lucy’s enjoyment was not so intellectual; she really did think everything superlatively delicious; and, though too well behaved to talk about it, a few expressive looks passed between her and her presiding niece, expressive on her part of unequivocal approbation, while on that of the pleased Isabella, there was an answering look of satisfaction, that “vouched the feast,” as often as their eyes encountered.

To Mr. Wentworth, indeed, the period was one of almost un-mixed suffering. The risk he had run of rendering worse than abortive the object of this annoying *réunion*, by giving way to a burst of temper at the beginning of it, caused him to put such restraint upon himself, as made him feel that his spirit was in chains.

“And for whom,” thought he, “do I endure all this? If it were a prince of the blood—if they were even of noble lineage, I could bear it better. O fool! to fancy that perfect beauty could only be found, like a violet, in the shade!”

But his sufferings had by no means reached their climax, till, with reluctant step and haughty brow, he had followed his father-in-law to the drawing-room.

Another man might have derived consolation, or, at least, experienced something like relief, from the cool freshness of the bottle of exquisite claret which followed the departure of the ladies; but not so Mr. Wentworth. He detested wine; and though scrupulously careful that none but of the finest quality should ever be quoted as appearing at his table, he had a truly ascetic indifference upon the matter himself, which would have made nectar, if tasted in any ordinary presence, unpalatable. It was only when bribed by the rank or station of his guests, that he could prevail upon himself, even to affect the power of discriminating their flavour; and when Mr. Worthington smacked his lips, and cheerfully exclaimed, “This is capital wine, Wentworth!” he could not coax himself to utter any reply more cordial than, “Is it, sir?” as he a second time pushed the bottle towards him, without replenishing his own glass.

Mr. Worthington, though he certainly liked good wine considerably better than bad, was not a man to desire much of it under such circumstances; and, consoling himself by a well-

timed reflection on the disgusting fondness of some country squires for that which his son-in-law so magnanimously despised, he obeyed without reluctance the early summons to coffee, which, according to order, was delivered in a clear loud voice, that might have made itself heard had the table been surrounded with guests talking as loudly as any were likely to do at the table of Mr. Wentworth.

The short interval of separation had, however, been just long enough to make Isabella feel how very happy she might be, if only permitted to have with her, now and then, without ceremony and without difficulty, the friends she so dearly loved. They all seemed to look at her with such heartfelt pleasure, to contemplate the elegance with which she was surrounded with satisfaction so greatly exceeding her own, that she thought, if she might but be blessed as she was at that moment, one day in every week, she could easily compound, and without repining, for all intervening annoyances.

But she severely felt how little power she had to obtain this, when Margaret, after running her fingers over the keys of a magnificent pianoforte, ran up to her and whispered,—

“Do you think, Isabella, that you shall ever invite me to come and stay with you?”

“I hope so, dearest,” she answered, colouring to the temples, as her heart told her how very vague and doubtful that hope must be; “but it will not be yet,” she added, endeavouring to speak gaily; “for we are to have Mrs. Wentworth here at the end of the week, and her son is so devotedly attached to her, that I do not believe he would like *any one* to be here who might withdraw my attention from her.”

“And how long is she likely to stay?” inquired Margaret.

“That I know not exactly; but she speaks of a week or two, I think, in her letter.”

At this moment the gentlemen appeared; and though perhaps there was not one of the ladies, excepting Isabella, who would have acknowledged to herself that Mr. Wentworth’s presence produced a disagreeable kind of restraint upon them, they all, excepting Miss Christina, decided upon postponing what they were just going to say to another time.

With the noble-minded Christina, indeed, the case was far different. She had soon perceived that during dinner all chance of engaging her new nephew in particular conversation must be given up; but, steadfastly determined not to suffer anything to turn her aside from the interests of the great question to advocate which she believed herself born, she sat awaiting his entrance to the drawing-room with nervous impatience, and

no sooner did he appear and place himself on the rug in his usual graceful manner, supporting his elbow on the marble slab of the chimneypiece, than she rose and resolutely walked across the room to him.

"Mr. Wentworth, may I have the pleasure of five minutes' conversation with you?" said she.

He looked at her, as if not understanding what she said; upon which, standing on tiptoe to approach his ear, and laying her hand familiarly upon his arm, she added,—

"I have something of great importance, my dear sir, to which I am very anxious to call your attention. Will you then do me the favour to come with me to that sofa?"

For a moment he stood uncertain whether he should appear more absurd by according or refusing this strange request, and it is probable he would have decided against her, had not two servants, bearing cups and coffee, stood close to them both at the moment.

"Do you take coffee, ma'am?" he said, evading for a moment the giving any answer at all.

"Yes, thank you, I venture upon coffee; it certainly rather assists, than impedes the intellect. Do you not think so?"

"I have not very deeply considered the subject, madam."

"No? I rather wonder at that. However, I see you take it, so your practice is with me. And now come with me, I beg you. Mr. Worthington is not fond of driving home late, and I fear I shall have hardly time——."

Here Mr. Wentworth suddenly turned to speak to his wife, who fortunately approached him. "My dear, let us have a song, if you please," said he, and prepared to lead her to the instrument, fondly hoping thereby to escape his persecutor.

"No, no, Isabella! you must not run away with him!" cried the persevering Christina, again laying her hand upon his arm; "he is going, my dear, to retire with me to yonder sofa, that I may explain to him a business with which it is absolutely necessary he should immediately become acquainted. Pray do not stop him!"

Mr. Wentworth, who would at any time have preferred the being bored within an inch of his life, to the risk of making himself in any way ridiculous, now felt that, in the terrible dilemma into which this determined little old lady had put him, there was danger of this, let him reply in what manner he would; and therefore, as the decided refusal which it was evident could alone suffice to make her release him, must make him appear *ungentlemanlike* as well as ridiculous, he suddenly decided upon the least detestable line of conduct that the circumstances admitted, and while his teeth were ground against

each other from inward rage, he replied with a bow worthy to grace any court in Europe, "I am ready to attend you, madam."

Isabella was sorry for the absurd exposure of her peculiar hobby, which she well knew her erudite aunt was about to make; but it was not a sorrow of the quality she had lately felt, for as she saw them depart, she could not suppress a smile. Happily her husband saw it not, or all the forced calm of the last few hours would have given place, like the treacherous stillness of the dog-days, to a storm that might have sent the whole party scampering in search of a shelter.

But fate designed not such a catastrophe; while Isabella and Margaret very sweetly warbled some of their favourite duets, Mr. Wentworth resolutely seated himself beside his tormentor, determined to listen to whatever she might choose to say, without permitting either herself or any one else to discover the disorder of mind into which she had the power to throw him.

"Well! thank God, my dear Wentworth," she exclaimed, "I have got you at last! And perhaps, after all, it is scarcely to be lamented that I did not find an earlier opportunity; for during your visit to the Continent I have greatly improved and matured my system. And now, before I disclose to you any hint of the great national measure in which I hope to obtain your assistance, let me, as a necessary, or at least a judicious preliminary, ask you one question: What are your own peculiar ideas on the great, the mysterious, the puzzling subject of population?"

"Ma'am?" uttered in an accent of interrogative astonishment, was the reply.

"You do not comprehend me. Perhaps I know why you do not," she replied, smiling complacently. "It is more than possible you may have heard it whispered in the county, that the great object to which I have devoted my life is not that of population. This is quite true, as you will yourself perceive when our conversation shall have advanced a little further. But nevertheless, in point of fact, I now consider this question as the great test and touchstone of every legislator's principles. The time may come, Mr. Wentworth, and perhaps at no very distant day, when such a test will be considered as more satisfactorily conveyed by another interrogatory; namely, this—*'What is your opinion of Mr. Wentworth's motion?'*"

This was spoken with a twinkle of the eye, and a sort of coaxing smile which would have endangered the gravity of most men; but to this peril Mr. Wentworth was always invulnerable; and his only feeling was that of fierce impatience, which found its best relief in the deep, silent, inward vows that his spirit

pledged to him, that no possible combination of earthly events should ever again force him to endure the presence of the audacious woman who now tormented him.

Having waited a moment for an answer, with her head in the attitude of a tame sparrow hoping for another crumb, Miss Christina started again without it, satisfied with believing that her legislative nephew was one of those invaluable listeners who do not deem their own remarks of sufficient value to justify the interrupting any important statement to which they have devoted their attention.

This is excellent! thought she. How very superior to my poor brother Worthington, who never lets me speak for five minutes together without interruption! "Your silence expresses better than any words could do, my dear sir, your wish to learn the nature of the motion I thus presume you to have made," she resumed; "and I will not keep you longer in suspense."

She now settled herself anew in her place, turned her little person round so as to be at right angles with his, and with the fore-finger of the right hand raised to within a frightful vicinity of his face, while the left, in its large white glove, spread itself out upon her sharp little knee, she again recommenced her harangue.

"In order fully to understand how imperatively the measure I would propose is called for at the present moment, it will be only necessary to take a rapid glance over the events of the last few years. The ever-accelerating movement of reform has brought the House of Commons to a degree of perfection, to which nothing can be added under the existing order of things. It is, indeed, even now a glorious spectacle; and when contemplated in comparison and contrast with the puling days of Pitt, Burke, Wyndham, and Sheridan, makes us feel what a bold and uncompromising reform may achieve. Yet, even thus, it does not fully satisfy the continually expanding hopes of the English people, they still feel, by what now seems an intuitive principle ever at work within them, that one step in their upward course leads, or ever ought to lead, to another; and that more, much more, must yet be done ere the great council of the nation can become all that it ought to be. Where, I would ask, can a people thus nobly aspiring, look for a model so aptly fitted to their high capacities, as that furnished by the immortals themselves? Does not the finest system of divine power ever conceived by man show us what ought to be? When the gods sit in council, Mr. Wentworth, are not the goddesses in presence too? And thus I come at once, and with no wearying length of prefatory eloquence, to the very centre and nucleus of my whole

design. Early or late, my dear sir—by your bringing forward the momentous change, or by some other, a few years later, catching at the glory you may have failed to seize,—early or late, Mr. Wentworth, it will be proposed that women shall sit in parliament. And in parliament the women of England will sit !”

To avoid looking at an object so every way disagreeable to him, the suffering gentleman had sat during the whole of this speech with his eyes sternly directed straight forward ; and though not in a condition of mind to bestow much attention upon any object before them, he at this moment perceived on the countenance of Mr. Worthington, who, standing with his back to the fire, exactly faced him, a smile exceedingly full of merry meaning.

Now Mr. Wentworth, as may have been mentioned before, was not a happy interpreter of smiles, and what acted like a rosy-tintured balsam on some spirits, was very apt to produce the effect of a blister on his.

This smile on the face of Mr. Worthington was indeed produced by the group of which the unhappy Wentworth made part, as was sufficiently evident from the direction of the laughing eyes ; and though assuredly it was intended to be more with him than against him, no idea suggested itself to his irritated son-in-law but that he was enjoying the ridiculous figure he made in the clutches of the odious Christina. Goaded already quite as far as his patience could bear, this last and almost worst offence that could be offered him, completely overpowered his capacity of endurance ; and, starting from the sofa, he crossed the room, and made his exit without bestowing a word or a glance upon any one.

Mr. Worthington was so little liable to take offence himself, that he was somewhat slow in perceiving when it was taken by others ; but he immediately suspected that the absurdities of his erudite sister-in-law had either disgusted Wentworth too much to be longer endured, or diverted him to such a degree that he had escaped to conceal the laughter he could not restrain. Judging by his own feelings under similar inflictions, the good-natured rector felt the latter hypothesis to be the most probable ; but yet there was something in the manner of the retreat that, rapid as it was, left disagreeable doubts upon his mind as to whether the cause of it were a merry one.

With this painful impression he approached Isabella ; and cutting short her harmony by laying his hand upon hers to stop its progress over the keys, he said in a whisper, “I am sadly afraid, Isabella, that Aunt Christina has been making such a fool of herself as perfectly to disgust Wentworth ; for he has just

started from her side without saying a word, and literally rushed out of the room. Perhaps he only ran away to laugh; but somehow or other I cannot help fancying he is angry. Had you not better go and speak to him?"

The sudden change perceptible in Isabella's complexion, and the anxious expression of her eyes as she looked up to the face of her father, showed plainly enough that it was the grave, and not the gay solution that she held to be the most correct; but though she rose immediately, she seemed to hesitate about the eligibility of following her husband.

"Suppose I ask Aunt Christina what they have been talking about?"

"Do so, if you like it. But what good will that do, my dear?"

Notwithstanding this discouraging answer, Isabella seemed decidedly to prefer this mode of obtaining information concerning what had passed, to that proposed by her father; and approaching her aunt accordingly, she took possession of the place her husband had left.

"What have you and Marmaduke been talking about, Aunt Christina?" said she; "and why did he run away so suddenly?"

"In reply to your first question, Mrs. Wentworth," said the offended lady, "you must excuse me if I say that I do not perceive any good reason why I should answer it; but to the other, I tell you fairly that it was because your new-married husband does not know what is due from a gentleman to a lady. Mr. Wentworth may be very rich, and, for aught I know, have a fine taste for furniture; but he is deficient both in intellectual energy and polite demeanour."

Isabella gave an involuntary glance round the large room, to assure herself that he was out of hearing, and then said with great sweetness, "Nay, nay, dearest aunt, you must not judge Mr. Wentworth so hastily. As I know not of what subject you conversed, I can give no opinion as to the cause of his sudden flight; but I am sure you love me too well to be really angry."

"Don't you think it is likely he may have left the room because he felt unwell?" said the pacific Lucy. "You know he turned very pale at dinner-time."

"I dare say that is it. Pray go to him, Isabella! Shall I go with you, my love?" said her mother.

Isabella shuddered at this proposition, and hardly less averse was she to going alone, persuaded that if she did so, some painful scene would ensue, which might render her immediate return to the drawing-room very difficult. After meditating for a mo-

ment, therefore, she said with her accustomed truth, "I know you will all forgive me, though it seems very rude; but if Wentworth be either vexed or ill, I think it would be better for me to be left alone with him."

Though this was said with some trepidation, from the fear of betraying the feelings that were at work within, not one of the party suspected that there was anything more in the business than had met the eyes of all; and perfectly agreeing with the young wife that in either case she would manage best by being left alone, they all prepared to take leave.

"If your father will order the carriage, Isabella, we will go upstairs while it is getting ready to put our hats on," said Mrs. Worthington; "and I trust you will either call or give us a line to-morrow, to tell us that all is well."

Greatly relieved by this easy termination of what she had feared must lead to the exposure of all she wished to hide, Isabella almost gaily preceded them up the stairs, indifferent for the moment as to what might fall upon herself afterwards, so that she might send them home with hearts unscathed.

Wilson had received orders from Isabella to lay out upon a table all the little *souvenirs* which she had pleased herself, even on first entering the pretty shops of Paris, in selecting for them all; and she had now the infinite satisfaction of seeing them depart gay and happy, perfectly satisfied that her lot was one of the very brightest that the world could bestow.

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## CHAPTER XV.

No sooner had the carriage driven from the door, than Isabella repaired to the library, which, though lighted, had not been entered; the amiable display with which Mr. Wentworth had intended to indulge his guests having been prevented by Miss Christina's unfortunate seizure upon him. But she found him not in the library; and she stopped for a moment before she went further, her hand pressed on her heart, as she thought how very decided he must be in his purpose of retirement if he were already gone (for it was not yet ten o'clock) to his dressing-room.

"What ought I to do?" thought she; and closing her eyes to shut out the ostentatious glare of useless light, she endeavoured to decide, to the very best of her youthful wisdom what it was her duty to do.

The meditation ended by her bending her steps towards he



husband's dressing-room. She knocked, but rather faintly, at the door, and received no answer. She knocked again, and received a low-toned "Come in," in return.

Wentworth was sitting by his fire with a countenance of the deepest gloom; nevertheless, she drew near him boldly, and ventured to lay her hand upon his shoulder.

"Are you unwell, dear Marmaduke?" said she. "What made you leave the drawing-room so suddenly?"

"Do you not know? Can you not guess the cause?"

"I greatly fear that my poor foolish Aunt Christina tormented you by some of her wild speculations. But you must not mind her comical projects, my dear friend; I am sorry to say we are all obliged to laugh at them."

"Laugh! I must not mind! Good God! am I to be talked to thus by the woman I have chosen? *I must not mind?* You venture to enter the retreat I have sought in the agony of disgust and suffering, to tell me I must not mind it? You act unwisely, Isabella, most unwisely. Would that my mother were here!"

"I would she were, Marmaduke. Most gratefully would I listen to her, if she would teach me how I could soothe you. Do not mistake my feelings if I do speak unwisely. I am very young, and, under many circumstances, may feel at a loss how to act; but at least be assured of this, that my first and dearest wish is to perform my duty well, and in everything to be exactly what you would wish me."

"This is terrible!" replied her husband, pressing his forehead with both his hands, almost wildly. "This is very terrible! Duty! you would do your duty by me? And I am to hear this, and bear it meekly too, I suppose, from the woman I have taken from among a set of drivelling idiots and grinning buffoons, to make my wife!"

"Oh, Marmaduke!" cried Isabella, greatly shocked, "what can I say?"

"Nothing! say nothing, madam; it is your best and safest course. Unhappily, most unhappily, my nature is too refined, too exquisitely susceptible in all ways, to endure such communion as I have submitted to hold this day, without sufferings a thousand times greater than more ordinary beings endure in passing the gates of death, and it is not your prating to me of your duty that can heal them."

The unhappy young woman stood silently before him, utterly at a loss to know how to conduct herself. If she left him in such a state of mind, how terrible would be their next meeting. If she remained with him, how probable was it that every word she spoke would irritate him further.

Many women, perhaps, might have found help in the practice of some of the pretty dissimulations so generally attributed to the sex. They might have wept or fainted, or even forced their pliant natures to hang upon and caress the man that tortured them: nay, it is possible, too, that deep philosophers of the nobler sex might be found who would deliberately approve of this line of conduct; but the innate, simple, sterling truth of Isabella rendered it impossible. Not, indeed, that she rejected it upon principle, for it did not even occur to her.

After a painful interval of several minutes, during which Wentworth kept his face concealed by laying his head upon his arms, which rested on the table, Isabella ventured once more to speak, and said,—

“Do you not think it would be better, Marmaduke, for me to tell my Aunt Christina at once, that it is disagreeable to you to hear ladies converse on such subjects, and that for the future she must never attempt to lead you into any *tête-à-tête* conversations?”

During the first part of this speech Mr. Wentworth remained in the attitude that has been described; but when she reached the words, “and that for the future,” he raised his head, and fixing his eyes upon her with a stare expressive both of horror and astonishment, remained thus till she had finished; then, starting to his feet, he said in a voice low and distinct, and from which all appearance of passion was banished,—

“Do you then really suppose, Mrs. Wentworth, that I shall submit myself again to the endurance of such suffering as the sight of that——” he stopped short, and recovering by an effort the tone of high-breeding, by which it was his chief glory to regulate his life, added, with a bow,—“as the presence of that too accomplished lady must bring with it, at least to me.”

The only self-reproach of which the mind of Mr. Wentworth appeared susceptible was what arose from his occasionally fearing that he might have transgressed the laws by which gentlemen are bound to regulate their speech, while giving way to the vehemence of his irritation; and the successful effort he had now made to stop, even on his lips, a phrase that he should have condemned as coarse and plebeian, did more towards restoring him to tranquillity than all the good and gentle feeling which Isabella could display. Thus, at the moment when her heart was more depressed than ever, at hearing a denunciation that threatened a total separation from some of her nearest relatives, he suddenly resumed a tone of reconciliation.

“We will not, in short, my love, waste any more time on a subject that must of necessity dispose of itself in the only way that can effectually prevent future suffering; but before you

retire to your dressing-room, I will add one word, and it is an important one, to what I have already said on the painful subject of this day's visit. I should feel, I assure you, my dear, very great reluctance to utter any command that would altogether separate you from your parents. This is a connection quite different in its nature from that other, of which we will never speak more; but even this, sacred as it is, will inevitably be shaken, unless your very excellent, but, pardon me, unpolished father can be taught to restrain his violent animal spirits a little. I feel the less reluctance in insisting upon this, because I cannot but think his profession and age, as well as the tone of my own manners, require it. I must therefore request that at your next interview you will hint to him, delicately but intelligibly, that I like not an eternal exhibition of boisterous mirth, and that in my own house I shall certainly so act as to avoid it. This is all I wish you to say on the subject; it might be inconsistent with your filial feelings to enter more particularly into what has passed. And now, my love, retire. I shall soon follow you. I had indeed intended to put my thoughts on paper, and so transmit them to you; but our conversation, Isabella, has been sufficiently satisfactory to render this unnecessary."

The conversation had indeed been of that very satisfactory nature which arises from the absence of all contradiction; Isabella had no courage to speak, though her heart was full; and silently bending her head in return to the nod that dismissed her, she left the room.

No sweetness of temper, however great, could avail to chase the painful recollection of this unhappy day from the mind of Isabella; and though as gentle as ever, there was a perceptible shade of sadness on her brow, which the rather unusual sprightliness of her husband had not the power to chase. Two or three days passed away, during which no intercourse, beyond a note to say that Mr. Wentworth was quite well, passed between her and her late happy home. She had "no heart to visit it;" the remembrance of the commission she had received was sufficient to keep her away, even if she had felt courage to announce her intention of making such a visit. Sunday recurred during this interval, and Isabella made her appearance at church.

The village neighbourhood, which was small and not very dignified, indulged itself, rather more conspicuously than was strictly polite, in gazing at the beautiful bride; and beautiful they allowed her to be, though in truth she neither looked very well nor very gay. But Mr. Wentworth, who, far from resenting this unceremonious sort of homage, would have been equally surprised and disappointed if it had not been offered, saw the partial eclipse of the star which he intended should blaze in the

eyes of all men, if they themselves did not; and as soon as the carriage door was closed upon them, he said to her,—

“You are very far from looking as you ought to do, Isabella. Are you ill?”

“No, Marmaduke; I believe not.”

“My dear!” he then rejoined gravely, but not severely, “I greatly fear you are out of temper.”

“Indeed, I hope not!” said she; “but perhaps I have not walked enough lately. I used to take so much more exercise than I do now, that perhaps my health feels it. I will walk for an hour in the shrubberies when we get home.”

Most newly-married men, if they discovered in their loved companions some latent excellence which had heretofore escaped their notice, would rejoice and be well pleased at the discovery; but never did any under such circumstances experience a more delightful complacency of spirits than did Mr. Wentworth, when he found what he deemed a fair occasion to charge his bride with being out of temper. The opportunity was invaluable to him, for not only did it account most completely to his own satisfaction for the paleness and want of spirits that were at present apparent, but it afforded him a sort of prophetic tranquillity and ease of heart, which he felt would solace him under any future uneasiness that might arise from witnessing the same symptoms in future.

No one circumstance, perhaps, had contributed so much to the self-acquitting peace of mind which he had enjoyed through life, as the established fact, that his mother was of an extremely bad temper. This had sufficed to neutralize and render of no effect, either for good or for evil, all the reiterated reproaches she had bestowed upon him for the same fault; and from the moment that he perceived, as he sat at church, the smooth brow of Isabella contracted by what seemed a frown (for her head ached sadly), he decided in his own mind that, though she had not as yet displayed any symptoms of a violent temper, she was unquestionably afflicted by a sullen one, which, by his own strength of mind, excellent judgment, and undeviating firmness, he must contrive to manage and bear with as well as he could.

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Early in the following week, the dowager Mrs. Wentworth arrived, and was welcomed by her son with great affection. He was, in truth, devotedly attached to her, as indeed her great and exclusive love for him well deserved that he should be. Both parties were nevertheless accustomed, not unfrequently, to yield to the infirmity of their natures in their intercourse with each other, when each invariably began, continued, and ended the

quarrel under the firm persuasion that whatever blame there might be attached to it, belonged wholly to the other ; but on all other occasions, when this unphysical plague-spot of their moral constitution showed itself, each strenuously supported the other, and with unmitigated vehemence declared that everything said or done in opposition to him, or her, was sinful, ignorant, wrong, and abominable in all ways.

Isabella, who, notwithstanding she cherished the remembrance of the flattering distinction with which the dowager had treated her during their first interviews, had not spent a week in meditating on the effect likely to be produced by this visit without some touch of fear, stood apart while the mother and son embraced, as pretty a picture of graceful timidity as eye could desire.

When at length Mrs. Wentworth turned towards her, it was evident that her first examining glance was directed to her dress ; there was no fault in it, and she was embraced with the flattering assurance that her *coiffure* was extremely becoming. The little party then seated themselves round the library-fire, and for a few minutes something like general conversation ensued ; Paris and its parties were discussed, Isabella was asked if she did not think the costume worn by the ladies at the opera peculiarly becoming, and some *haut ton* London news commented upon. After this, Mrs. Wentworth, making a sign to her son to change his place, which was opposite, to one beside her on the couch she occupied, began some whispered communication which it was so evidently her wish that none but he should hear, that Isabella, after a short questioning with herself as to what might be "discreetest, best," under the circumstances, presently rose, and left the room.

Notwithstanding the perpetual recurrence of such paroxysms of ill-humour as I have endeavoured to paint, no newly-married husband, in the fondest fervour of his happiness, nor any long-married one, clinging to the soothing presence whence he derived all the best comforts, both major and minor,—neither the one nor the other of these could more pertinaciously covet and insist upon constantly enjoying the company of his lady-love, than did Mr. Wentworth ; so that Isabella had very rarely sat herself down beside her dressing-room fire alone.

At the first moment she experienced a feeling of tranquillity and relief, as she now so placed herself, that seemed like comfort ; and as she sank into the luxurious *bergère* that ever stood there ready to receive her, she reclined her head on the swelling softness that seemed to invite it, closed her eyes, and thought, with a sigh, that she could be well pleased to rest in such quiet idleness for ever.

But her mind and spirits were not in a state to be long lulled into such repose by any arm-chair in the world. The idea of her mother, of her father, of Margaret, of the dear old man whose chief joy she had been for more years than she could well remember—the whole beloved group rose before her with all the vividness and warmth of reality; and stretching out her arms, as if to embrace them all, she felt the void that was around her with such terrible intensity, that she burst into the heartiest fit of weeping she had yet indulged in.

It might have lasted longer, for there was a strange sort of luxury in it, had she not feared that traces of its bitter comfort might be left upon her cheeks. Her alarmed fancy conjured up her husband's eye and her husband's voice, both commanding her to show cause why she had been weeping. This was quite enough to check the indulgence, had it been ten thousand times more soothing, and needed not the recollection of Mrs. Wentworth's chilling elegance and cold curiosity to assist its effect. She wept no more, but she pondered deeply on the mysterious web in which she seemed to be entangled, on the airy nothings that made her so unspeakably wretched in the midst of seeming happiness; and more sadly still did she ponder on the icy barrier that seemed rising between her and her family.

"It will strengthen, it will increase day by day!" she whispered inwardly; "I see it, I know it. O God, teach me to cure it or to bear it! But how will *they* bear it? They have no duty that must force them to smother all they feel. Much better had it been for them had I died!"

At this moment Wilson entered the room without the ceremony of her usual tap; for she was in haste, and full of matter.

"Old Mrs. Wentworth has been gone to her dressing-room this ten minutes, ma'am; and I waited and waited, expecting to hear my bell, till at last Philip told me that he was sure you had been in your room ever so long, so I would wait no longer. What dress, ma'am? I do assure you there isn't a minute to lose. She didn't get here till close upon six o'clock, and dinner's to be on table at seven."

"Well, Wilson, bring out what you will—we shall not be long about it, I dare say."

"How I do hate that horrid dressed-up Mrs. Crofts, the old lady's maid!" murmured Wilson in her mistress's ear, as she proceeded with her business.

"Pray do not call Mrs. Wentworth the old lady, Wilson; it is disrespectful, and quite absurd into the bargain."

"But what am I to call her, ma'am? It is so very tedious to be always dragging out the word dowager, and she can't rightly be called Mrs. Wentworth any longer, you know, ma'am."

"Oh! yes, she may, I assure you. We will share the title between us, Wilson. And as to your hatred of her maid, I strongly recommend you to hate no one."

"But how am I to help it, ma'am? I know you won't be pleased if I tell you all my troubles, and you will say, as you did once before about that snake, Mrs. Oldfield, that you wished to hear no gossip from the servants' hall: but indeed it is very hard and unkind; for there is not one of the whole set, except Philip, that I care to speak a word to."

"I do not mean to be unkind to you, Mary," said Isabella, her heart softening at the idea that the poor girl as well as herself was in a new land; "and I stopped your complainings only because I thought it wrong to encourage them, and not because I felt indifferent about you. Has any one behaved ill to you, Wilson?"

"Bless you, ma'am! That is so like my own dear Miss Isabella; but mercy on me, there is the last bell! Here's your gloves, ma'am. Here's your handkerchief. We must not mind the *eau de Cologne*. There! Now you are just as nice as if I had been an hour dressing you; and, thank God! I haven't heard master's door open yet."

Wilson was right, the door had not opened, and Isabella had the good fortune to be the first in the drawing-room. Mr. Wentworth entered next; and having complimented her on the beautiful arrangement of her hair, he took her hand, and said,

"I hope, my love, you were not offended by my mother's having addressed a few words especially to me? I do not mean," he added, holding up his hand as if to deprecate her anger—"I do not mean to say that you betrayed any violence of temper. But by your so immediately leaving the room, I feared that you were not quite pleased."

"Not so, the least in the world," replied Isabella; "my only reason for going was, because I thought she must have many things to say to you; it is so natural after your long separation! But was I wrong to go, Marmaduke? I hope she was not displeased at it?"

"No, quite the contrary, my dear; she seemed ready to receive it, as I am now quite sure it was meant, rather as a mark of respect than of displeasure; and for my own part, I desire nothing so much as that you should at all times consult her wishes, and act in exact conformity to them. But you are aware, my love, that I have some reason to be anxious about the manner in which every little event may affect your temper."

Isabella had not the least idea to what these words alluded, and might, perhaps, have found courage to ask him, had not Mrs. Wentworth immediately entered. Her dress was most

studiously elegant,—so much so, indeed, that Isabella began to suspect she had permitted Wilson to attire her much too simply; an opinion in which it was evident Mrs. Wentworth shared, for her first words were, while they still stood side by side on the rug together, “I hope, Isabella, you do not mean to neglect your dress; as a friendly hint, I will tell you that there is nothing Marmaduke dislikes so much as any negligence of the toilet. Your simplicity is quite pastoral, my dear.”

“How kind this is of you, my dear mother!” exclaimed Wentworth, as he ran a scrutinizing eye over the plain silk dress of his wife. “Isabella, you cannot be thankful enough for such goodness. Neither England nor France either can show you a more perfect model of elegance in dress and deportment than Mrs. Wentworth. Nor is this all; in the arrangement of your house, of your dinners, of your servants, be very sure that the only certain way of never blundering will be by constantly seeking her advice, and implicitly obeying it. There is nothing in this, I hope, Isabella, to irritate you, or excite your temper to any unpleasant feeling?”

“On the contrary, Marmaduke,” replied his wife, with a gentle smile, “I shall feel truly grateful for any instructions that may teach me how to give you pleasure.”

The dinner was announced, and Mr. Wentworth, after a moment's thought, offered an arm to each, and both accepted it; but on reaching the door-way, the dowager Mrs. Wentworth murmured something about “love-making in door-ways,” and danger to blonde sleeves, which made Isabella withdraw her arm, and drop behind.

“It is very true,” observed the gentleman, “Isabella must excuse my mansion's not having *des portes battantes* through which to lead her in proper style;” and thenceforward she followed in the wake of her magnificent mother-in-law.

The evening passed smoothly, if not gaily; and so did the morrow, and the morrow. On the first evening, Mrs. Wentworth permitted Isabella to sing one song, and repaid her for it by observing that her voice was of very sweet tone, and that her singing would have been certainly agreeable if she had been well taught.

The mornings of the first three or four days were employed in going over and discussing the various improvements that had taken place in the house, and in arranging a box of recently imported shells which Mrs. Wentworth had brought down with her. In all this Isabella joined, endeavouring as nearly as possible to occupy on all occasions the exact place in the group which the dowager thought fit to assign her; but this was not at all times an easy matter. If she withheld the expression of



her opinion, "You seem to care very little about it," was the observation that followed; and if she unhappily differed from her on any point, the result was much worse, being invariably punished by a remark that "anything was better than a dispute;" while, when she pronounced a cordial approval and agreement in opinion, all notice whatever in return was carefully avoided. In all this, Mr. Wentworth seemed scarcely anything more than an echo of his mother, excepting, indeed, when any remark of his own happened to be dealt roughly with; and then, in the most gentlemanlike manner imaginable, he ventured to scowl, like a wounded lion, and to hint very delicately that nobody could by possibility know half so well as himself what ought and what ought not to be.

By degrees this routine was diversified by the visits of some of the neighbouring families, of whom the majority were already known to Isabella more or less intimately, and to the rest she underwent the ceremony of a very formal presentation, under which she was so keenly watched by her mother-in-law, that the blush, so natural from her situation and her youth, often became painfully and, worse still, unbecomingly conspicuous; and then she was sure to undergo the process of a lecture upon the absolute necessity of her struggling to conquer the rustic and unlady-like timidity engendered by her education. Such was the usual phrase, but upon one occasion Mrs. Wentworth added, "or rather, perhaps, the want of education. Pray, my dear, had you ever any governess? or were you ever at school?"

"I never had any instruction but from my dear mother," replied Isabella, "excepting that for two or three years my sister and myself went every morning to a French lady, who then lived in the village, to learn music and French."

"A day school!" remarked Mrs. Wentworth.

Isabella did not reply, but the tell-tale blood mounted to her cheeks.

"I am sure, Mrs. Wentworth, I did not intend to make you so angry. You really look perfectly in a passion," said the dowager.

"Then my looks deceive you, madam," replied Isabella quietly; "for I do not feel in a passion."

Mrs. Wentworth, senior, turned a glance towards her son, which seemed to say, "Do you hear this?"

Wentworth, who was infinitely more mortified by the unnecessarily simple statement his wife had made of her defective style of education, than disposed to resent the attack made upon her in consequence of it, replied to this appealing look by saying very sternly,—

"Isabella, let me conjure you, both for my sake and your

own, not to give way to your unhappy temper. For myself, as you well know, I rarely or never resent, or even notice it; but you must not expect I shall be equally forbearing where my mother is concerned. I must request that you will immediately apologize to her."

Surprised and grieved, far more than offended, Isabella looked from one to the other with gentle and imploring eyes, and said,

"Mrs. Wentworth, now and ever my best apology must be, that I did not mean to offend you. I pray you to forgive me if unintentionally I have done so."

"There is no occasion to ask forgiveness from me, Mrs. Wentworth; my only wish in life is, that my son should be happy and honoured. The refinement of his own manners must naturally lead to his being very anxious about yours, and whatever observations I make on the subject ought surely to be attributed solely to my tenderness for him."

Isabella bowed in silence, and soon afterwards left the room.

This retreat was exceedingly injudicious, for she left her husband and his mother in the best possible humour to find fault with her; and by leaving them the opportunity to do so, she did herself considerable injury with both, for whatever the one said, the other listened to as valuable and important information; and before she appeared again before them, it had been mutually acknowledged that Isabella, though lovely, innocent, and kind-hearted, was unhappily of an exceedingly defective temper, and that her total want of an even decent education would render it necessary for them both to take every opportunity of correcting the constantly-recurring effects of so lamentable a deficiency.

The consequence of this was, a sort of eternal schooling upon everything she said and did, that required more than angel patience to endure; nor was it the least part of her difficulty, that these scenes were often followed by caresses from her husband in the absence of his mother, which required more simulation than she was capable of, to receive cordially. Sometimes she began to suspect that her temper was indeed irritable, and she prayed to God for power to master it; but with all her efforts, she could only become submissive and silent. To be fond, conversable, and gay, was beyond her power; and before the dowager had been a month in the house, it became a settled and acknowledged fact between her and her son, that, though from her faultless beauty his wife did credit to his taste, he had made a choice which, upon the whole, was likely to prove most fatally unpropitious to his happiness.

## CHAPTER XVI.

THIS weary, painful month had not, however, passed away without Isabella's having seen her family, although the doing so was attended with some difficulty, and not achieved, at last, without submitting to such a mixture of condescension in the manner of it, on the part of her friends, as to pain her very severely.

Isabella had been fully aware, even before Mrs. Wentworth arrived, that during her visit, the intercourse with the Abbot's Preston parsonage would be considerably restricted; she remembered but too well the haughty lady's refusal to dine there during her former stay in the neighbourhood; and, even if this had left any doubt upon her mind, Mr. Wentworth's manner of mentioning the subject would have been quite sufficient to prevent her from forming any unreasonable hopes of general sociability between the houses. But all this, and much more, became most painfully clear to her understanding, after her mother-in-law's arrival; for not only did she perceive that all the estrangement between her husband and her family which her fears had predicted would be more than realized, but, from the tone which this lady had taken with herself, it appeared by no means improbable that she would interfere to prevent her going to them herself. It was then that, for the first time, Isabella began to feel that she must nerve her mind to something like opposition; for that no feeling of respect to the mother of her husband could justify her neglecting her own parents.

It was therefore immediately after some little sally of impertinence on the part of Mrs. Wentworth, in which Isabella felt her family implicated, that she took courage, during the absence of the dowager for the purpose of letter-writing, to say,—

"Do you think, Marmaduke, that Mrs. Wentworth will use the carriage this morning? If not, I should like to call on my mother."

Mr. Wentworth looked a little surprised, and felt more so; yet what could he say in the shape of objection to so reasonable and natural a proposal?

"To-day? You wish to go to Abbot's Preston to-day, do you, my dear? I have no objection, I am sure; but you are quite right about my mother; I shall certainly think it proper to ask her if she wishes the use of your carriage this morning."

"May I send to ask the question now?" said Isabella.

"I think she is engaged at present—I believe she is writing letters again. She has an enormous correspondence."

"When, then, do you propose asking for her decision, Marmaduke?"

"When she leaves her boudoir to join us at luncheon, I think," he replied, adding, "that will leave you quite time enough, my love; and I want your assistance in the shell-room; we must re-arrange great part of the catalogue, Isabella."

From this there was no appeal, and Isabella endured nearly three hours of very tedious occupation, amidst a continued series of petty fault-findings, sometimes *à propos* of her extraordinary ignorance of conchology, sometimes of her unhappy want of education in general, and all summed up in a tender and affectionate lamentation on the unfortunate defects of her temper.

But luncheon came at last, and here Isabella's better star prevailed; for the very first words Mrs. Wentworth uttered, as she seated herself before a small dish of exquisite grapes, which, with a peculiarly choice sort of Rhenish wine, was always prepared for her at this repast, were,—

"Upon my word, Marmaduke, if I suffer my correspondents to multiply upon me as they have done of late, I must positively hire a secretary. Here's a beautiful day, yet I do not intend to stir! I have no less than five different packets to make up for London and Brighton; you will be in the library, I suppose, before the bag is sent off, in order to frank for me?"

Mr. Wentworth answered in the affirmative; but his countenance darkened as he did so, for he would much rather that his mother should have taken a drive that day.

To attempt changing any of her declared arrangements was, however, always out of the question; and he therefore made no observation upon the subject; so the sweet voice of Isabella made itself presently heard in a very cheerful accent, as she said, "Then the carriage is not wanted, Marmaduke?"

"No, so it seems," he replied, drily; and she wisely said nothing in reply, though she received a glance of very direct inquiry from the expressive eyes of her mother-in-law.

That her husband was displeased, she plainly saw; and if the project had had anything less important for its object than this long-delayed visit to her home, she would certainly have abandoned it: but she felt that she ought not to do so; and, as she perceived that the present was of that species of cross fit which led to his saying nothing, she retained her purpose, preferring to run the risk of receiving *a paper* on her return, to that of passing another heavy fortnight without feeling herself pressed to the heart of her mother.

She left the room, accordingly, as soon as the luncheon was over, ordered the carriage, and set off. Her reception at the parsonage was tenderly affectionate, but far less joyous than at her last visit. She was too evidently looking ill, for any momentary emotion to conceal it; and her father, uncle, and sister, all looked at her with very painful alarm.

With equal interest, with equal anxiety, but not with equal uneasiness, her mother contemplated the striking change in her appearance; and, making an excuse to lead her from the room, her maternal wisdom soon elicited the truth she hoped to learn,—Isabella was in the way to become a mother.

Nothing could tend more effectually to facilitate the pious fraud by which the affectionate daughter sought to conceal how vain all her hopes of married happiness had already proved, than this circumstance. It was immediately converted by the whole family into an explanation of all and everything which they found changed in the darling of their hearts. Paleness, thinness, low spirits, rare visits, were all, as they thought, most satisfactorily accounted for by it; and the chief uneasiness that remained on the mind of Mrs. Worthington, arose from Isabella's avowal that she did not believe either her husband or Mrs. Wentworth suspected her situation.

"That is very wrong, Isabella—very wrong in every way. What can induce you to conceal what you must know would give so much pleasure," said she.

"It can hardly be called concealment, mamma, for I was far from feeling quite certain about it."

"But you will not permit it to continue any longer, Isabella? Of course, you will mention it to Mrs. Wentworth immediately."

Isabella coloured, but from feelings very different from those attributed to her, as she replied, "I cannot think that necessary, dear mamma; something about it may occur to her by-and-by perhaps; and if so, she will question me as you have done; and that, I think, will be quite time enough to say anything about it."

"To tell you the truth, Isabella," replied her mother, "I had quite determined not to call upon your proud mother-in-law. Her conduct the last time she was here was intolerably rude to us; and though I certainly did not attach enough importance to it to conceive it at all worth mentioning to Mr. Wentworth, both your father and I decided against putting ourselves again in her way. But now I think I shall call at Oak Park to-morrow, and far from avoiding, I shall ask to see her."

"Well, mamma, do so," replied Isabella, after a moment's consideration. She was aware, perhaps, that there was in the

news to be communicated something tending to make her dear mother's watchful tenderness of importance, and anything that could by possibility lessen the hateful estrangement to which it seemed intended to make her submit, had value almost incalculable in her eyes.

Thus the visit altogether ended well, and to the mutual comfort of all parties; nor did the well-drilled Isabella this time neglect her watch, carefully timing her return so as to reach her mansion within five minutes after Mr. Wentworth's first inquiry, "Is your mistress returned?"

All this was fortunate, and the spirit of Isabella was cheered and comforted; yet, notwithstanding this, she could not but feel the cold silence which was preserved by both her companions on the subject of her morning's excursion—no question asked, no friendly inquiry made; but, on the contrary, a sort of cautious avoidance of the subject that looked very much as if it had been decided upon and planned between the mother and son during her absence.

Mrs. Worthington kept her resolution; and at rather an early visiting hour on the following morning, was driven by the servant to Oak Park. Margaret accompanied her; and finding, on inquiry, that the two ladies were in their respective boudoirs, Mrs. Worthington told Margaret to run upstairs and seek her sister, while she desired to be shown into the morning drawing-room herself, whence she despatched a message to the dowager, requesting the honour of seeing her.

The sisters met without difficulty, and very happy was the hour they passed together; but it was a considerable time before the message of Mrs. Worthington produced any effect at all; and, at length, instead of its bringing the dowager herself, it was her son who made his appearance.

Mrs. Worthington felt the affront; but her heart was too full of her daughter's situation for it to check the great object of her visit, and she at once decided upon communicating it to him.

"I wished to see your mother, Mr. Wentworth——" she began.

"I am exceedingly sorry," he said, interrupting her; "but, the fact is, my mother very rarely receives any company whatever in a morning."

"It matters not greatly," replied Mrs. Worthington, "whether it be her pleasure to see me or not; I should not have sought the interview, Mr. Wentworth—and so, if you please, you may tell her—had I not that to communicate which, I presume, will be considered as important news by both yourself and her. My dear Isabella is likely to become a mother."

That Mr. Wentworth, at least, considered this news as important, was immediately evident.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "is it possible? But how came it that she has not mentioned it either to me or my mother?"

"It was to obviate the difficulties which her too great shyness has thrown in the way of this communication that I am now here. I wish also to mention to you, and intended to do so to your mother likewise, that it is evident to me, who know her well, that Isabella is suffering from her situation, and that very great attention will be necessary to prevent permanent injury to her constitution."

"Indeed!—do you think so, Mrs. Worthington? Perhaps it will be better for you to see my mother? On such an occasion she will, of course, break through her usual habits; and, if you will have the goodness to excuse me for a few minutes, I will bring her to you."

Mrs. Worthington bowed her acquiescence, and he departed.

Again for nearly a quarter of an hour she remained alone; but at the end of that time Mr. Wentworth again appeared, and, with an air of considerable ceremony, ushered in "his mother." The salutations were stiff enough on both sides; but the dowager condescended to say,—

"You have brought us very welcome news, Mrs. Worthington; yet I am sorry, too, that my daughter-in-law could not find courage to announce it to us herself."

"Isabella is very young, madam," replied Mrs. Worthington, "and this must be her excuse. I fear, too, that she is not very strong; and I conceive it to be absolutely essential to her doing well, that she should take moderate but constant exercise, be exposed to no fatigue, and, above all else, that her spirits should be cheered and supported as much as possible. She is already sadly altered; and though, of course, we have every reason to hope that she will come back by-and-by to her former health, I cannot but feel that great care and attention are necessary."

"Let the stricken deer go weep,  
The hart ungall'd play——"

Now Mrs. Wentworth, senior, was not ungalled; and if she did not weep, she winced very perceptibly on receiving these hints from Mrs. Worthington. It was not merely that she had a particularly great objection to receiving hints or counsel of any kind; but she instantly conceived the idea, which no after circumstances could ever erase from her mind, that Isabella, during her visit at Abbot's Preston on the preceding day, had made complaints to her family of the manner in which she had been treated by herself.

The very comfortable feeling of indifference as to everything which could be thought or said concerning her by the humble individuals residing there did not apply to the present instance. That a spy should be watching and publishing the inmost arcana of her domestic secrets was intolerable, and very bitter sentiments were engendered by it. But this was not a moment for showing them, and she glided with very snake-like sinuosity from the subject, which she felt to be dangerous to her self-command, by saying,—

“This is a point upon which, of course, we must all agree;” and then taking one from the several new books which lay on the table, she began to examine its engravings, and, turning to her son, remarked that they had been placed there since she left the room.

“They have just arrived from London,” he replied.

“How exceedingly beautiful these things from Turner are!” she observed, and then continued her examination in silence. And so ended the interview with which Mrs. Worthington was honoured.

Having remained quite long enough to ascertain that this transition of attention from herself to the engravings was not intended to assist conversation, but to put an end to it, Mrs. Worthington, turning to her son-in-law, said,—

“I will see my daughter in her dressing-room, if you please.”

Mr. Wentworth, a little ashamed of the very cavalier treatment which his lady’s mother had received from his own, replied, very amiably, while hastening to open the door for her,—

“Pray, do! Nothing, I am sure, can be more agreeable to Isabella than a visit from you; and I beg of you, my dear madam, to enforce upon her mind the necessity of taking the greatest care of herself.”

On reaching the boudoir, Mrs. Worthington found her two daughters enjoying a conversation that had been delightfully uninterrupted, and, on the part of Margaret, extremely unreserved and confidential. Hardly had they settled themselves at each side of the fire, when she had said,—

“What a treat, Isabella, to have you all to myself!—and how I have longed for it!”

“Dear Margaret!—it is a treat, indeed,” replied Isabella.

“But to me particularly so,” rejoined Margaret, with a glow of complexion which showed she was drawing near some very interesting theme—“more so, perhaps, than you have any notion of. Do you remember, Isabella, how you always used to tease me about Frederick Norris?”



"O yes! — I remember the eyes and teeth," replied Isabella, with somewhat of a melancholy smile.

"But, indeed, you must be serious now, if you can; for all my happiness depends upon it. Isabella, he has proposed to me!"

"My dearest Margaret!—and you really love him? But has he any property, my dear? What do papa and mamma say to it?"

"There's the rub, Isabella. At present he has positively nothing but his curacy; on the death of his mother, he will come into three hundred a year; but she is far from old, and he loves her much too dearly to look forward to her death as a signal for happiness. But he has a hope, Isabella, the fulfilment of which will rest, I should think, almost wholly with you?"

"What can that be, my dearest love?"

"You know, of course, that poor Mr. Roberts is considered as being very dangerously ill. The living, with its pretty parsonage close beside your park, Isabella, is in Mr. Wentworth's gift. Cannot you guess the rest?"

"My dearest sister! Oh! if this could be, Margaret, how very, very happy I should be! Our shrubberies, where I walk constantly every day, at one point skirt the parsonage lawn. Can you imagine anything so delightful as our thus meeting constantly?"

"I thought you would like such a plan, my own dear Isabella, though it will place me beside you in a situation so greatly less distinguished than your own. But it would be the same as that held by our dear father, and would satisfy every wish of my heart."

"And of mine for you, dearest!" replied Isabella, with energy. "If you know, or can in any way ascertain that Frederick Norris is a good-tempered man, and if he loves you, and you love him, there is nothing in the world that I would not do to promote your marriage with him."

As poor Margaret was very heartily in love, this assurance sounded most sweet to her ears, and was repaid by a thousand thanks and a fond embrace.

"And see you not, Isabella," said she, "how very much it is in your power to do for us? Can you doubt that a simple statement of the facts to Mr. Wentworth, backed by your all-powerful influence over him, would, beyond all doubt, obtain all we want, and all we wish?"

"I will tell you what I see, my dearest sister," replied Isabella, "and feel, too, at the very bottom of my heart—that I will do my utmost to obtain a promise from Marmaduke,

that, when Mr. Roberts dies, Norris shall have the living of Oakton."

"And is it possible you can doubt your success?" said Margaret.

This was a terrible question, and hard to answer in any way. Did she deny her confidence in her own interest with her husband, it would become evident that they were not on such terms together as they ought to be; and did she express such confidence, a degree of hope, more sanguine than she felt any right to encourage, would naturally take possession of her sister's mind.

After a moment's reflection, she answered,—

"I cannot feel certain of success, dear Margaret; because I know not whether Wentworth may not already have promised the reversion of Oakton."

"Have you heard anything of this?" inquired Margaret, turning pale.

"No, I have never heard him allude to the subject in any way."

"Then surely there is hope for me!" exclaimed the fair petitioner. "Dearest Isabella! let me owe all my happiness to you!"

At this moment Mrs. Worthington entered; and the pleasure of thus receiving her without restraint, brought back a feeling of happiness to the heart of Isabella that it had long wanted.

"May we not often meet thus, mamma?" said she. "It is so much more easy for you to come to me, than for me to go to you!"

"There is nothing I can love so well, as our meeting often, dearest, let it be where it will," replied her mother. "But it is a droll notion of yours, that we, with our one horse and car for all the family, shall find it easier to come to you, than Mrs. Wentworth, with her own particular carriage, servants, and horses, to come to Abbot's Preston."

"It does seem very ridiculous to say so," replied Isabella, colouring; "but when Mrs. Wentworth, senior, is here, she seems, I think, to consider the carriage as more hers than mine."

"I doubt it not," replied Mrs. Worthington, smiling; adding, after a moment, "Pray, my dear, do you continue to admire Mrs. Wentworth quite as much as you did the first day you met her here?"

"No, mamma, I do not," was Isabella's reply.

"It is weak, and perhaps wicked, to rejoice at this; but, in truth, I could not bear that you should love that woman."

"There is no fear of it. Her son certainly loves her; but I much doubt if it be possible that any one else should. The very elegance that I admired so much, is so ostentatious and fatiguing,

that I should a thousand times prefer my warm-hearted simple Mary Wilson for a companion."

"It is impossible it should be otherwise; but this is only a speck upon the brightness of your lot, my dear girl, and it would be ungrateful and ungracious to complain of it."

"I do not, mother," replied Isabella, gravely, "and when we meet together, in all the delightful freedom of this dear little room, we will make a law, if you approve of it, never to waste any portion of such precious time in talking about her."

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From this period, Mrs. Worthington and her daughter, and, now and then, her sister Lucy, frequently visited Isabella in her dressing-room, only inquiring if she were at home when they entered, and then proceeding, without further ceremony, to mount the stairs. To facilitate this, Isabella, though little given to feigning, did sometimes plead a headache as an excuse for remaining up stairs, which, without such a motive, might not have appeared to her of sufficient consequence to justify her seceding from the drawing-room.

Mrs. Wentworth, if aware of this arrangement, neither did nor said anything to mark disapprobation of it; and for her son, who, beyond all question, was well acquainted with all exits and entrances made through his portico and hall, he conceived these visits to be a natural result of the interesting situation of his lady, and would (such was at that time his bachelor ignorance), have almost as soon interfered to restrict her daily food, as have made any opposition to it.



## CHAPTER XVII.

DURING this time Mr. Wentworth evinced great fondness for his beautiful wife: and could he have restrained the sour irritability of his miserable temper, and the petty ebullitions of the paltry vanity which made him shrink from the avowal of equal rights and equal dignity even with the chosen partner of his greatness, she might again have almost fancied herself happy; for she fondly flattered herself that the intercourse with her family, now enjoyed only in her dressing-room, would, when Mrs. Wentworth should have departed, be permitted to assume the shape and tone she naturally wished to give it. This hope did much towards restoring her spirits; but, unfortunately, Mr. Wentworth frequently accompanied her in her airings, the daily regularity of which he now insisted on, with a pertinacious punctu-

ality, which, to most spirits, would soon have rendered the monotonous routine a very hateful one. Isabella, however, endured it meekly and sweetly; giving him full credit for the anxious care which made him so watchful of her proceedings, and enduring, better than most women could have done, the galling chain which he contrived constantly to make her feel was an essential part of the golden and flower-bedecked harness she had put on.

It is true that at this time several weeks passed away without his pushing any quarrel so far as to render "a paper" necessary at its termination; for in truth he was greatly delighted at the prospect of an heir, and upon many occasions had rather the manner of a very silly nurse petting a sick baby, than of a martinet husband, who, both by principle and inclination, was of opinion not only that it was his wife's duty to obey, but that she should do nothing else, and think of nothing else from morning to night.

Nevertheless, his smoothness was like that of a newly macadamized road, which, though looking very nicely level at a little distance, is rugged and full of jarrings when you come in contact with it. His very care of her was in truth full of worry and unrest.

"Pray, Isabella, do not read that stupid book any longer just now! It keeps you in a constrained position that I am *quite* sure must be bad for you," he said to her one evening when, as both mother and son were reading, she ventured to indulge herself also.

"I am very comfortable, dear Marmaduke," she replied; "this chair is particularly easy."

"Your position may very possibly be an unhealthy one nevertheless, Mrs. Wentworth, and I must request that you run no risks just at present."

The pleasant volume was meekly laid aside, and Isabella took up her netting.

"Do you think, ma'am," said her attentive husband, turning to his mother about five minutes afterwards, "that this sort of work is good for Isabella?"

The dowager lady, though far from being a jocose person, had some difficulty to conceal a smile as she replied:—

"Certainly not, Marmaduke. In my time, when such an event as we now look forward to was expected in a family of condition, the lady was generally prevailed upon to confine herself during the greater part of the day to a recumbent posture upon the sofa."

"Then for God's sake, Isabella, do not resist the advice so kindly given, but put your feet up; and instead of complaining,

as you really look disposed to do, of the irksomeness of such necessary restraint, think of the happy fate which awaits you."

Isabella's natural health and spirits were excellent, and though the disappointment of her gay young hopes had certainly produced its usual effects on both, she was still as far as possible from requiring such precautions as were thus enforced. Unhappily, too, she found herself, in spite of all her efforts and repeated self-schooling on the subject, quite unable to receive pleasure from the toying and childish caresses to which her husband often condescended, with a view to amuse and console her, as it seemed, under the privations which his great care dictated. Among other effects of the overweening self-approval which made so essential a feature in Mr. Wentworth's character, was his persuasion that his fine person and graceful manners must inevitably inspire a passionate personal attachment in his wife. Never upon any single occasion, however vehement had been his expressions of contempt or displeasure against her, had it entered his head to suspect that such scenes continually repeated might destroy the love he had inspired during the period of his passionate courtship. But he was mistaken, as every man and woman inevitably will be, who imagines that the tenderest and most delicate feeling of the heart can be buffeted and shaken thus with impunity. The perfect and undeviating sincerity of her character, too, was against him; for while her temper could with little effort be brought to endure harshness without a murmur, her true heart revolted from the expression of fondness she no longer felt. And thus it naturally enough happened, that a young creature capable of the most steadfast and elevated attachment, received with outward coldness, and a feeling within that was perhaps stronger still, the fiddle-faddle demonstrations of connubial love with which Mr. Wentworth was wont to offer solace for the inert tedium of the life he deemed it necessary to the safety of his heir that she should lead; while the short bright period during which she had given up her heart to all the delightful hopes of constant and mutual love, seemed to her like a dream.

Among other restrictions, Mrs. Wentworth, senior, strongly recommended the declining all dinner engagements in the neighbourhood; and though it might be necessary to receive at home the few families whose invitations they had already accepted, she very decidedly gave it as her opinion, that the less company they received at present at Oak Park, the better it would be. Some idea may be formed of the probable result of her interference on the general happiness of Isabella, by reciting a conversation which passed between the mother and son about this time.

It chanced that Mrs. Wentworth, senior, was passing through the hall just at the moment that Mrs. Worthington, Margaret, and Miss Lucy Clark entered it on their way to Isabella's dressing-room.

A very slight and distant salutation was exchanged, and then the dowager, changing her purpose of entering the drawing-room, paid a visit to her son, who was occupied in the library.

"Shall I disturb you, Marmaduke?" said she, pausing a moment before she seated herself.

"Most assuredly not!" he replied, moving a seat for her nearer to the fire.

"I hardly know," she resumed, "if I am wise in seeking you at the present moment; for I am vexed and disgusted, and perhaps I should do better were I to conceal, instead of confessing it."

"Do not think so, mother!" he replied, eagerly. "You cannot doubt that all your feelings must be mine, and surely nothing but good can arise from the most perfect confidence between us."

"It is certainly thus that I have ever reasoned, Marmaduke; and I own I should with difficulty adopt any other system. But, dear son! the seeing your house besieged and haunted by those vulgar Worthingtons, is grief of heart to me; and the telling you this may be worse than useless."

"At any rate, you create no new feeling in me, by stating your own," he replied, bitterly; "you cannot, mother, suffer from it a thousandth part as much as I do."

"Is it so, Marmaduke?" said she musing; "I knew it must come, but guessed not it would come so quickly."

"Quickly?" he repeated, "you call it quickly now? Why, mother, I detested the whole set, excepting their too beautiful daughter, long before I married her."

"And yet you persevered, Marmaduke? Did no recollection of my earnest remonstrance recur to you?"

"It is much too late to talk of all this now, ma'am. I always felt that I had a right to marry the handsomest woman I could find, and I defy any one to impugn my taste in the choice I made."

"You say truly, Mrs. Wentworth is extremely beautiful; but I suspect that among the rich and high-born, there may, perhaps, be found women as beautiful."

Wentworth winced, and the dark cloud began to gather on his brow—a signal of coming violence too well known to his mother to be either unobserved or mistaken. She had no intention at present to enter into the moody manner in which both of them loved so well to exhibit their prowess and their skill,

and therefore, withdrawing the lance she seemed to brandish, she added,—

“However, it is at least certain that you could nowhere have found a more correctly beautiful, or naturally graceful person; and, believe me, I am by no means indifferent on this point. I have ever considered it as of vast importance that a man of your station should select as mother to his children a female thus distinguished. That I did wish one so every way highly gifted as yourself to have found all advantages combined in a wife, I will not deny; but perhaps I was herein guilty of loving you too well, and of expecting too much. All this, however, is very idle talk. But tell me, my own Marmaduke, can nothing be done—can nothing be *ever* done to make this country parson’s odious wife feel that she is not privileged to bring herself and her ill-dressed, vulgar *cortège* to gallop over your house, without leave asked or given, as I saw them doing this instant as I descended the stairs?”

“This sort of freedom is hateful to me, mother,” he replied, “and no earthly consideration should induce me to submit to it, except the belief that my hopes of an heir (the great object after all for which men in my station marry) may be in some degree endangered, if I suffer Isabella to want the sort of care and nursing that I suppose she has been used to from her mother.”

Mrs. Wentworth smiled.

“What makes you smile, ma’am? You know that I like not jesting greatly better than yourself. What is it makes you merry, mother?”

“Merry?—I am not merry, Marmaduke; none, I believe, can ever be so, who permit themselves to be as tremblingly alive to the happiness of another as I am to yours. It was no merry feeling that caused the smile with which you reproach me. I was thinking, my dear son, how greatly noble natures often impose upon themselves. If this vulgar Mrs. Worthington has told you, Marmaduke, that this sort of close attendance is necessary to the well-doing of her daughter, she has deceived you. No humouring of this kind is at all necessary. Mrs. Wentworth must not be permitted to exert herself in any way, and she must be kept as much as possible in a recumbent posture. This is all that is required, as Clarke, I am sure, will tell you, if you consult him. But as to any advantage to be obtained by your wife’s sitting in a boudoir instead of a drawing-room, and having a regular cart-load of cackling women deposited beside her every morning, believe me it can be in no way beneficial, and the arrangement is, in my opinion, not very creditable to any of the parties concerned.”

Mr. Wentworth listened to this with deep attention: for his mother's profound *savoir* on very nearly every subject that could be brought before her, he entertained the highest respect; and a feeling of severe indignation kindled within him as she spoke, at the idea that his affection and tenderness had been converted into tools to undermine the system upon which he had already given his wife to understand that her intercourse with her family was to be regulated.

The hot blood mounted to his temples; his mother saw it and rejoiced.

"My dearest Marmaduke!" she exclaimed, "you know not with what pleasure I see the expression of your countenance at this moment! It would indeed be a cruel fate, were I, who have so often bent before the constitutional vehemence of your nature, to witness your degradation into that most contemptible of all characters, a placid all-complying husband, who, like Miss Edgeworth's high-born blacksmith, suffers his wife's kindred to shove him from his state. No, Marmaduke, this must not be. Let every imaginable care be taken of your beautiful Isabella. Her child—her son, in God's name, may it be!—will be born to prospects of no ordinary importance; but let not the mother meanwhile sink back into the mire from whence, with such disinterested affection, you have drawn her."

"I will not, by Heaven!" exclaimed Wentworth; "and I bless you a thousand times, for guarding me against such drivelling weakness. But tell me, dear mother, is there no danger that contradiction may be productive of bad effects on Isabella?"

"Certainly not. There is nothing in her situation that requires her being made a spoiled child of. If there were, how would the world go on so vastly well as it does in this respect, and with so very little trouble? Peasants—ay, Marmaduke, starving and heart-broken peasants bring forth in safety. So set your heart at rest."

"Set my heart at rest! You speak too late, mother! I have already, I fear, committed myself too far to recede wholly and entirely from the childish notion that contradiction, forsooth, might hurt my wife! Oh, wherefore have you never spoken to me thus before?"

"Nay, Marmaduke, I never suspected this amiable weakness could go beyond the permitting the arrival of the clerical baggage-waggon every morning. To what do you allude? How have you committed yourself?"

"By promising to give the living of Oakton to some man her sister is going to marry. By Heaven! I despise myself for such facility fully as much as you can despise me; though it is



not difficult, ma'am, to perceive the low point to which I have fallen in your estimation."

"For God's sake! do not speak thus bitterly to me, Marmaduke, because I cannot disguise from you the disgust and astonishment I feel at this transaction. But it is not your part in it that is detestable," murmured the insidious mother; "imagine what a family must be who can lay such a plot for taking advantage of your present feelings! But let it pass,—let it rest at least. Mr. Roberts, poor man, is not yet dead; and before he is, it is possible that good reasons may appear for your not performing a promise which, by the very nature of it, could only be conditional."

"That certainly is true,—the promise was only conditional; for I only promised Isabella to do as she wished in this matter, provided the young man proved deserving."

"Then all is safe, Marmaduke; such proper caution is exactly what I should have expected of you, and is quite sufficient to prevent your being importuned into doing any act of which your deliberate judgment may not approve."

"I trust so. But it will be proper, will it not, to inform Isabella that her sister must not consider this matter as at all settled. It will not do to let the girl marry a beggar, under the expectation of his being the successor of a man, pretty well known to be dying, in a living of nine hundred a year."

"You know best, Marmaduke. But were I you, I should say not a word farther on the subject. If you do, depend upon it you will raise a very vulgar clamour about your ears; whereas, if you let things take their course, no blame can attach to you, whatever portion may lie at the door of any one else. Besides, it is hardly probable that her father will permit her to marry till the man is actually provided for in some way or other."

"Perhaps you are right. God knows, I feel no inclination to interfere with any of their concerns. But now, ma'am, you have not told me in what manner you would recommend me to check the eternal visitations of these people? Of course I do not intend to do anything rude or ungentlemanlike, and I really feel at a loss how to proceed."

"There is some difficulty in it," replied his mother; "in all things it is true that *c'est le premier pas qui coûte*, and in nothing more than such a case as this. I doubt not that, when I first came here, Mrs. Worthington would have felt that there was some difficulty in arranging a daily visit for herself and Co., at Oak Park; but now it has become quite a thing of course, and as difficult to stop as the underground entry of a mole into your garden; but, nevertheless, it doubtless may be done, and we must think about it. Perhaps it would not be amiss to order,

that the party shall be constantly introduced, in the first instance, into the drawing-room where I usually sit. If you really wish it, I think I could without much difficulty give them a hint, that their obliging assiduity gives them more trouble than is necessary."

"Will you undertake this for me, mother?" said Wentworth, eagerly; "I shall really be very much obliged to you, and the more so, as I am quite sure that if you manage it, no imputation can be thrown upon the gentlemanlike feelings which, as you know, regulate my conduct to everybody. You are as incapable as your son of being vulgarly rude, even to get rid of such a nuisance as this."

"I believe you may venture to trust me, Marmaduke," she replied, "and now I must resume my letter-writing."

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

INSTEAD of immediately sitting down to her desk, however, Mrs. Wentworth rang her bell, and desired that Oldfield might be sent to her. This was no very unusual occurrence; for the present housekeeper at Oak Park had, in the days of yore, been her confidential personal attendant, and still held a very high place in the counsels of her former mistress, who, as we have before stated, had procured her present situation for her.

"Sit down, Oldfield—lock the door and sit down," said Mrs. Wentworth, as soon as the old woman appeared; "I have that to tell which is worth the speaking, and the hearing too. I shall not always, Oldfield, live in the purgatory of the last few months. I shall not always have to endure the sight of this low-born penniless beauty lording it in the mansion where I have ruled. She is already at discount, my good Oldfield, in the favour of my son."

"I don't overmuch think, madam," replied the sly old woman, "that she ever was at any great premium in his opinion and judgment, as I may say. She was a dainty-looking pretty miss, no doubt, and that said, all's said on her side of the balance. Oh! ma'am, if you would but have pretended to give him head, as I advised you to do, when he wrote that first foolish letter, about unequalled beauty, and all the rest of it, take my word for it, he'd have begun backing straight away, and we should never have heard any more about the happiness of his life depending on the parson's daughter."

"I know it, old woman; I know it!" exclaimed Mrs. Went-

worth, passionately. "Never reproach me with it again, or I'll pack you off into Norfolk, to grow leaner than you are, upon your pitiful annuity! I was bewitched to do it! knowing him as I do. But remember, Oldfield, whatever I may be forced to listen to from within," and she touched, expressively, the region of her heart as she spoke, "I will not bear to be reminded by you, that, when the most important act of this idol's life was at issue, I then, and then only, forgot to rule his imperious nature, by the masterly management of my own. Yes, Oldfield, you did tell me so; and, for not listening to you I have to linger through I know not what difficulties, what sickly long-drawn hopes, and doubtful machinations."

"I suppose you know your own plans, madam," returned Oldfield, drily, "and, of course, it is my duty to stand by and do your bidding, though I don't understand what it leads to. You sent me here to watch this childish young thing, and to report to you all I could see and hear; this don't amount to much, as I have already told you, ma'am; the worst I see of her being, that she knows no more about a dinner than the man in the moon, and I can't but think, that, if I comprehended your object a little better, I might help it a good deal more."

"I dare say you might, my keen and crafty aide-de-camp; but be pleased to remember, before you twist your temper into a fit of obstinacy to revenge my supposed want of confidence, that it is necessary before a plan be communicated, that it should be formed. Your wit is sharp enough to understand this, I think?"

"So far, there's no great difficulty, ma'am," replied the puckered old woman, with a grim smile.

"Very well, then; no more reproaches, if you please, of any kind. I tell you, Oldfield," continued Mrs. Wentworth, dropping the severity of her tone, "I tell you, that the happiness of my Marmaduke is no longer bound up with this moth-like piece of beauty. She started, Oldfield, from a very grub, and caught his brilliant light upon her gaudy colouring, and, now she has lost it, she will soon turn grub again."

"If, instead of being the young gentleman's mother, you were his mistress," replied the fearless Oldfield, "I should, old as I am, be able to understand your joy in this; but truly, ma'am, I don't comprehend it now. You have been wearing your heart out in useless regrets, because you don't approve Mr. Marmaduke's lady, and now you seem to be taking comfort, because you fancy that he begins not to approve her either. If I were not restrained by my great respect for you, madam," added the old woman, with one of her peculiar grins, "I should say this could be nothing but sheer spite against him; for how will he be

the better, or the freer man, for learning to get tired of his young wife?"

"Your *great respect*, Mrs. Oldfield, does not prevent your asking a very pithy question; and, though I know that you are one of the most impertinent old women in existence, it is my intention to answer you. Did I find that my beautiful noble-minded son still loved the toy that he has bought at such tremendous price, I would have worn out my heart still, as you call it, in vain regrets, rather than have caused his a pang by any effort of mine to cure them. But I have this day heard him speak a language, as little like the devoted love which, if blighted, might work woe or death to the fond heart that cherished it, as your love to your master, Mrs. Oldfield, is to mine."

"And do you think the young gentleman's chance of happiness is the better for that, ma'am?" interrogated the venerable Oldfield, with affected simplicity. "For a certainty you must know best; but I should have thought, if you had not spoken to the contrary, that, seeing the long life they have most likely got to pass together, his taking a dislike to her was about the most unlucky thing that could happen."

"You are a fool," replied the lady, tartly.

"Well, ma'am, if that's so, you have the less reason to be displeased if I don't happen to agree with you."

"Why, what on God's earth does the woman mean? You have not taken it into your head to conceive a tender dutiful attachment to your new mistress, have you?"

"No, ma'am," replied Mrs. Oldfield, composedly.

"Then pray, Mrs. Oldfield, may I venture to ask what it is you do mean when you talk of disagreeing with me?"

"I must beg you, ma'am, to be pleased to remember that I cannot speak so openly as you do, without great danger. How do I know," she added, crossing her lean tight-sleeved arms across her person with increased rigidity—"how can I possibly be sure, that you may not pack me off to Norfolk, to grow leaner than I am, upon my pitiful annuity?"

"You are sharp, shrewd, bold, and resolute, Mrs. Oldfield, and withal most commodiously unscrupulous, with a reasonable mixture of avarice; high qualities with which, as you may remember, I became acquainted when, some eight-and-twenty years ago, you so ably assisted me to destroy the reputation of a rival, who seemed to stand in the way of my entrance to this same Oak Park. Wherefore, henceforth and for ever, I absolve you from all restraint in speaking the thoughts of your vigorous and exceedingly depraved mind. Be as insolent as you like; but in return help me to do my will, let it be what it may, and then you shall not grow lean in Norfolk as a reward for it. This

bank-note for ten pounds may serve as a pledge of my future favour."

The housekeeper rose from the chair on which she had placed herself at a respectful distance from the lady's sofa; and walking slowly across the room, stretched out her bony hand, and received in it the offered fee.

"Sit down here, Oldfield," said Mrs. Wentworth, pointing to a chair that stood near her.

Mrs. Oldfield obeyed, holding the folded note between her fingers. "What am I to do for this?" said she, after the silence of a minute or two.

"For that, Oldfield, you are to do nothing, except listen to me carefully, that not a word I say may be neglected or misunderstood. For what you may subsequently have to do, the reward would be far different, and fully sufficient to render your return to Norfolk no starving project. Oldfield! I hate my daughter-in-law."

The grim, stiff, upright, old woman looked steadfastly into Mrs. Wentworth's face, and said, in a tone of voice that in no way differed from what was ordinary to her,—

"It will be necessary that we should speak quite plainly on both sides, or we shall never get to do any business; and so, to save time, I will tell you at once that I shall not consent to murder young Mrs. Wentworth."

"Audacious woman!" exclaimed the dowager, knitting her dark and lofty brow into a tremendous frown; "how dare you use such language to me?—how dare you breathe so horrid and unjustifiable a suspicion?"

"Upon my word, ma'am, we had better make an end at once," replied the old woman very quietly; "for if you will get hot and hotter with every word I say, it is out of all human possibility that we should come to an understanding."

"You say truly, Oldfield. I really beg your pardon; but your frightful plain-speaking, as you call it, startled me; and the more so, doubtless, because your coarse and disgusting suggestion had, I do assure you, never for an instant entered my head," replied Mrs. Wentworth.

"I am glad of it, ma'am," returned the old woman in the same tranquil tone; "because I should be exceedingly pleased to acquire the independence you mention; and it is high time I should have it, seeing I begin to feel my limbs grow stiff, though the health and strength of my brain, I think, still continue in good repair."

"I rejoice at the assurance, my old friend," answered the dowager; "for presuming that to be the case, it is very certain you will find nothing to object to in what I shall propose; and

for the infirmity of your joints, I promise you it will be of no inconvenience to me whatever. Pray," she continued in a bantering tone, "was their weakness the cause of the ill-timed protestations you made just now?"

The housekeeper again fixed her keen and deep-set eye on the countenance of her companion, and then answered with great apparent indifference, "No, ma'am, it was not."

"Abstract virtue then, Mrs. Oldfield? That was it, was it?"

"It might be cowardice, perhaps, ma'am, or want of use," replied Mrs. Oldfield: "I have done a variety of things not quite consistent with what I believe is called abstract virtue, but I never murdered any one."

"Neither directly nor indirectly?" said Mrs. Wentworth, interrogatively and with a caustic smile.

"It is not easy to know exactly, ma'am, what you may mean by indirectly. My first master after I left you, and made myself, as you may remember, head cook for the sake of higher wages, died of gout in his stomach. My soups and ragouts were exceedingly rich and heating, and so perhaps I killed him indirectly?"

"And the wretched Emma Somerville's feelings of grief and shame were very excitable; so perhaps you killed her too, indirectly?"

"I have never thought much about the matter, madam; the arrangement of that business did not lie with me. I made good use of the money I received for it; for I took my eldest daughter off the town, and set her up as a mantua-maker in the most fashionable part of London."

"Where of course you knew she would live a respectable life for evermore? You are an exemplary person, Oldfield."

"Really, ma'am, your severity is undeserved. I did the best I could for her, and would have much preferred her living respectably, if I could have prevailed upon her to think it for her advantage."

"Well, well, this is amusing myself very idly; for my questionings, Oldfield, will elicit no new trait in your character. I believe I know you very thoroughly."

"I dare say you may, ma'am," said the demure old woman, again indulging herself in studying the magnificent physiognomy of the dowager. "When clever clear-sighted women have lived for many years in close connection together, they can seldom fail, however different their stations, of knowing each other's characters pretty thoroughly."

Mrs. Wentworth bit her lips, and launched one of her tremendous frowns against the impassive old woman; but seeing and feeling that this too was an idle amusement, she suddenly resumed her tone of friendly familiarity, and in a manner that

seemed to imitate the cold composure of her confidante, she said,—

“Well, Oldfield, if we do know one another, there is the less reason for us to waste time in beating about the bush. I will tell you frankly that I do not wish this young woman, who has been guilty of great presumption in marrying my son, to lead a happy life with him.”

“I should not think, ma’am, that there was any fear of it,” replied Mrs. Oldfield.

“I agree with you; she is low-minded, tame and dull in spirit, and utterly destitute of any of the nobler qualities which are alone capable of permanently attaching such a mind as that of Marmaduke. But, as I have said, I do not wish she should be rewarded for the fatal injury she has done me, by leading a life of love and happiness with him. My fixed and deliberate purpose, Oldfield, is to prevent this, and herein I expect your zealous assistance.”

“You have engaged to pay me handsomely,” replied the old woman, “for doing whatever you may desire; and as I have no suspicion but that you will keep your word, I am quite prepared and willing; but to be as fair and liberal in my dealings with you, as I expect you will be with me, I am, I think, bound to tell you that for the purpose you mention there will be no need whatever for my services. My master will do the business himself much better than either you or I, ma’am, you may depend upon it.”

“You mean that she is likely to suffer from the inequality of his temper.”

“I don’t know about inequality, ma’am; I think he seems to go on pretty equal and even in the way of teasing and fretting her.”

“Of course, he is weary to death of her already,” replied Mrs. Wentworth, looking by no means displeased at the old woman’s statement. “It is the natural and inevitable result of so hateful and absurd a marriage. But, Oldfield, I do not mean to disguise from you that my wishes and hopes go further; I do not despair yet, my trusty Oldfield, of seeing the darling wish of my heart realized—I do not despair yet of seeing Lady Mary the wife of my son.”

“I don’t know, ma’am,” replied the counsellor deliberately. “I don’t think you will be wise to fill yourself with that sort of hope. Young people are very hard to kill, I fancy, by mere vexing and fretting; and I should not wonder if in time she got used to it, and began to grow fat and rosy again.”

“She was never very rosy, you know, and I suspect that her constitution is extremely feeble; but as to her growing thin, her situation may account for it.”

"Well, ma'am—and what do you wish me to do?"

"I wish you, Oldfield, when I am gone," said Mrs. Wentworth, looking at her steadily, "to lose no opportunity of promoting Mr. Wentworth's evident and most reasonable discontent at his present, I may call it, unnatural situation. Of course, I do not mean to require of you anything that could commit yourself in the least, or that could be thought wrong by reasonable and well-judging people. But, in fact, I should consider myself a monster, Oldfield, were I *not* to desire that such a man as Marmaduke Wentworth might survive the dreadful consequences of the folly of which he has been guilty. Had he committed any crime, indeed, I might reason differently; if he had seduced the girl, for instance, instead of marrying her, I should, I am sure, have been quite ready to give him up to all the plagues a stupid, uneducated mistress might bring; and whether she lived or died would have been a matter of little moment to me; but now the case is far otherwise. I pity as much as I love him; and I do certainly consider it as a duty to render this hateful marriage as little happy as possible. Should the sickly thing die, so much the better—God forbid I should be such a hypocrite as to deny that I should rejoice; but if she will live on, at least let it be apart from him. A few years of such wrangling as my poor ill-matched son's temper is likely to produce, if properly acted upon by you, Oldfield, will make her very willing to separate; and then—if the dearest wish of my life, if his marriage with my high-born young friend should remain impossible, I shall at least feel that he is in some sort restored to me; my visits here would no longer plunge me in the purgatory that I am enduring now."

"At present, ma'am, I believe I understand you," said Mrs. Oldfield. "You wish (you will please to excuse me if I speak too plainly)—you wish that my present master and mistress, after living together for a few years on as bad terms as we can contrive to make them, shall finally be induced to separate, and live apart for the rest of their lives. Am I correct, ma'am?"

Mrs. Wentworth coloured slightly, but replied with great composure, "You are."

"The office of principal peace-disturber, which you assign to me in this business, is not a pleasant one," rejoined the grim-featured old woman, with a look which her former mistress immediately understood as the forerunner of a hard bargain; "and before I engage to accept it, I must desire to know precisely at what rate it is to be paid."

"Bravo! Oldfield," exclaimed the lady, laughing, and not sorry perhaps to have reached this part of the negotiation. "The very ridiculous sort of education which it pleased my greatly-respected grandmother to bestow on the child of her son's wet



nurse was not wholly thrown away ; you are an accomplished negotiator, and never permit the details of business to withdraw your attention from its main object."

"Were I so weak as to act thus, ma'am," replied the crone demurely, "I should show myself incapable of doing justice to the trust you repose in me."

"All very true, and I think you, as I always have done, you know, a very admirable person. Now as to the terms, Oldfield, upon which I am willing to engage your services, they must greatly depend upon the promptitude, as well as skill, with which they are performed. Thus, if the separation which I desire to bring about be achieved in one year, you shall enjoy for life an annuity of fifty pounds ; if in two, it will diminish to forty ; if in three, to thirty ; if in four, to twenty ; if in five, to ten ; and beyond that, let it happen when it may, if then, indeed, it should happen at all, I shall consider that you have been fully paid, for services of so lagging and insufficient a nature, by the very excellent and highly-paid situation which you hold here, and from which, of course, I could get you dismissed in an hour, if I chose it."

The old woman's almost immovable features underwent a slight change as she listened to this ; and, during the minute or two she remained silent to ponder on it, her thin lips almost totally disappeared ; at length she replied,—

"For a lady of a very violent temper, ma'am, you have, generally, great command over yourself ; but I must take leave to think, that the same wisdom which gives you this power might be usefully employed in restraining the words you speak to the agent with whom you deal in such a business as this. Your fifty pounds, your forties, and your tens, are certainly at your own disposal ; but I do not believe, ma'am, that my daily bread depends so wholly on your pleasure ; not to mention that, in common prudence, it is wise to keep on decent terms with those whom we honour with such very perfect confidence, ma'am, as you have bestowed on me."

"Forgive me, Oldfield ! This hateful girl has so embittered my spirit, that I cannot speak, even to you, without showing it. No, no ! I am too well acquainted with your value to mean offence, however harsh my words may be ; so think no more of it. Should you be satisfied by this annuity of fifty pounds ?"

"If I were sure of it, ma'am, at the end of a year, perhaps I might be ; but the uncertainty makes it widely different."

"That uncertainty, Oldfield, will, I think, rest very much with yourself. Without flattery, I may tell you that your abilities are of no common order ; and, if you keep such watch and ward as I would have you to do, over such a temper as my son's, and such a poor passive doll as his wife, I cannot think you need

make a very long business of it. Remember, you told me yourself, at the beginning of our conversation, that you thought things might be left to their natural course, and that what I look to, and wish for, might be fairly expected, without your troubling yourself about the matter. Do you remember this?"

"Perfectly, ma'am," replied the old woman sharply, "and I think so still, if it suits you to be contented with incessant worrying on the part of my master, and unceasing submission on that of my mistress; but to bring about a separation between them is something altogether different; for you may depend upon it, let him grumble, or storm, or write papers as he will, it will be no easy matter to put it into his head, that it would be best to separate from a sweet pretty creature who bears all so meekly. I don't think it very unlikely that she may be willing, after a year or two more of it; but as for him, trust me, ma'am, there'll be no hope of what you want, from letting things take their natural course."

"Perhaps not—perhaps not," returned Mrs. Wentworth, while her features, in powerful language, spoke the difference between her own fierce temper and the modified infirmity she had first bequeathed and then fostered in her idolized son. "How strange it is, Oldfield," she continued, musing herself on this remarkable difference—"how strange it is, that resembling me, as he does in so many points of character, he should in others be so totally unlike! He has my pride, my vehemence, my restless anxiety lest those around should dare infringe the privileges owed to nature and to fortune; but for my firmness and my resolute will, he has them not."

"Do you lament this, ma'am?" said Mrs. Oldfield, with a slight approach to a smile upon her shrivelled lips.

"Do you jeer me, old woman?" sharply demanded the dowager, who, however much they might differ in some respects, shared all her son's aversion to a smile. "Let me advise you not to drive me past my patience."

"There is no danger of it, ma'am, at least for long together, till this difficult business is settled between us," replied the audacious agent.

This was not the first time Mrs. Wentworth had been taught to feel something like envy at the immovable composure of her old servant; but she was tolerably well used to yield to the necessity of bearing it; and now, as heretofore, after a moment's struggle, subdued her rising vehemence, and resumed, as her shrewd observer predicted she would do, the subject upon which she was so deeply interested.

"We digress terribly, my good Oldfield," said she, "and if we go on so, we shall never get to an end. To bring about a

separation between my son and his wife is, in one word, the great object I have in view. Whenever this takes place, whether you may have done little or much to promote it, you shall receive a deed of settlement for an annuity of fifty pounds, and for every year less than five in the period before it happens you shall have ten pounds more. Does this content you?"

"Ten pounds more for every year I live?" rejoined the old woman.

"Ten pounds more for every year you live," answered Mrs. Wentworth. "Will this satisfy you?"

"Yes, ma'am, it will," was the succinct reply.

"Then, now leave me, Oldfield; our long interview may be observed upon. Be watchful of your opportunities, and you will not, as I think, be very long ere you receive your reward."

"I hope it may prove so, ma'am," replied the old woman, rising; and, having set back the chair she had occupied against the wall, she made a low and reverential courtesy, and left the room.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

THE application made by Isabella to her husband on the subject of the living of Oakton, though not met by him in that spirit of cordial kindness to her family which she had once fondly hoped to see established, nevertheless, had received such an answer as to justify her telling the happy Margaret that if Mr. Norris's character and qualifications bore the test of examination, he might confidently hope, when Mr. Roberts died, that Mr. Wentworth would present him to the living.

The ecstasy produced by this assurance was beyond description great (for the whole heart and soul of Margaret had hung upon the answer her petition should receive), and for a moment Isabella watched it with delight; but, then, the period for the fulfilment of these ardent hopes appeared so uncertain, that, in her character of matron, she thought it discreet to add, "Yet, after all, dearest Margaret, you must remember, before you finally accept him, that it may be a very lingering engagement. What does mamma say to it?"

"Mamma, papa, uncle David, everybody have given their consent, Isabella, provided we got this dear, precious promise—and we have got it! Bless you for it, my darling sister, a thousand and a thousand times! I do believe that at this moment I am the very happiest person in the world!"

Could Isabella, as she listened to this, feel any regret that she

was Mrs. Wentworth, of Oak Park? No!—she forgot herself, and rejoiced.

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This *tête-à-tête* between the sisters, which was now an enjoyment of very rare occurrence, took place upon an occasion which produced effects considerably less delightful to some others concerned.

The abortive conclusion of Miss Clark's attempt to engage the parliamentary services of her new nephew in favour of her great scheme had naturally left a very galling recollection on her mind; and for several weeks afterwards she was never heard to name him. At length, however, it happened that she found or fancied herself in great want of a book which she could not obtain at the Taunton library, but which she doubted not must be in the noble collection at Oak Park.

After struggling for a day or two either with the fear or the anger, or perhaps both, inspired by Mr. Wentworth's late conduct, she determined upon writing a request to Isabella that the volumes in question might be sent to her. But, ere her letter was half written, she changed her purpose; for a thought suddenly struck her that the nobler and more independent mode of proceeding, and one infinitely more worthy of herself and of the principles on which she felt bound to act, would be once more to address Mr. Wentworth himself.

"He is not the first man," said she, as, for want of a more congenial counsellor, she discussed the matter with her sister Lucy over the breakfast-table—"he is not the first man by many whom I have seen wince under the idea of female equality. But because he is pitiful, shall I be cowardly? These are the opportunities, Miss Lucy, for putting my principles to the test. His weakness must not interfere with my strength. Wherefore, Miss Lucy, I am screwed up, and perfectly determined to burn the letter I have begun, and to ask this rude, unenlightened senator for the volumes I want."

Though this was, in fact, little more than a soliloquy, as frequently happened in the communion between the sisters, Lucy was too kind-hearted not to answer, though, as usual, she comprehended not very clearly the subject-matter of Miss Christina's discourse; and she now replied, at hazard, "I am sure what you say is all right, sister Christy; but, you know, I am no great judge."

The elder sister sighed gently as she answered, "Yes, certainly—I know that full well; but perhaps you can tell me, Miss Lucy, if my sister Worthington is going to Oak Park to-day? I should not mind walking; but I shall choose to have either her or Margaret to go with me."

"I am glad to say that I can answer that question, Christy, if

I cannot help you in matters more important," replied her gentle sister. "Both my brother and sister Worthington are gone over to Taunton in the car to-day to bring home Charles for the holydays, dear boy! I think, Christy, they told you so yesterday; but I dare say you did not hear a word of it, for you had got your note-book and pencil in your hand."

"You are right for once, Miss Lucy—I heard nothing about it—and how should I? It is of little use to tell you of it, perhaps; but the fact is, I am drawing out a table of immense importance to the country. When completed, it will show, at a glance, the comparative number of males and females whom circumstances may impede in the performance of their parliamentary duties. After all, Lucy, I suspect we must submit to a regulation that no woman can be deemed eligible till she is fifty."

"Dear me!—you don't say so? Only think of that!" replied Lucy. "But do just look here, Christy; does not this bit of cabbage in the rabbit's mouth look like real? What a lovely colour it is! That's all owing to Bella's beautiful bright worsteds, and the white silk to give the shine."

As the amiable enthusiast said this, she drew into full view the frame on which her brilliant labour was suspended, and looked at the rabbits with a mother's love.

"I do think, Christy," she said, after a long fond gaze at them—"I do think this piece will be perfect!"

"And what is Margaret going to do to-day?" said Miss Clark.

"Margaret?—I don't remember if she told me; but she is not going to Taunton, I know, because of the horse. I do hope and trust Mr. Frederick Norris will not happen to think of riding over to Abbot's Preston this morning. That would not do at all, would it, Christina?"

Before this question could be answered, the door opened, and the pretty Margaret herself stood before them.

"This is lucky," said Miss Clark; "I was just inquiring of your aunt Lucy what you were going to do, my dear, while your mamma and papa are at Taunton. I want you to walk over with me to Oak Park, Margaret."

"What, now, this minute, aunt?" said Margaret, smiling, and gladly taking the chair which the kind Lucy placed for her. "Let me sit down and rest for half an hour, and I will go with the greatest pleasure. Does Isabella expect you, aunt Christina?"

"Oh, dear, no! I dare say young Mrs. Wentworth will be extremely surprised at my coming. She certainly cannot suppose that I shall ever enter her doors again. But, when a few

more years have passed over her head, and over yours too, my dear, you will both learn to know that there is more in me than meets the eye."

Margaret looked puzzled, and seemed at a loss what to answer, which the kind Lucy perceiving, she hastened to relieve her niece and indulge herself by displaying the progress she had made since they last met. This consisted of the nose and one ear of the rabbit, together with that bright-tinted fraction of a cabbage-leaf which has been already mentioned.

The conversation produced by this, and the other growing wonders of the canvas, occupied the time till Miss Clark was equipped and Margaret rested, when they set off for Oak Park, which they reached without having wasted many words on each other; for the elder lady was deeply engaged on the great subjects of population and universal suffrage, and the younger one on that more confined view of human affairs which relates to the election of one alone, by only one, and of that trifling and comparatively unimportant branch of the population question, which embraces merely the welfare of such children as may be born of one family.

On arriving, Miss Clark demanded of the servant if Mr. Wentworth were in the library.

"Yes, ma'am, he is," was the reply.

Upon which, without further question, the intrepid reformer addressed herself to the door of that apartment, while Margaret ran up the stairs with the activity of one who is anxious to get out of harm's way, and soon forgot, in the delightful conversation with her sister, which has been already mentioned, all care for the result of that which her aunt might be carrying on below.

When Miss Clark entered the library, she found Mr. Wentworth and his mother *tête-à-tête*. For a moment or so, she felt a little embarrassed at this; but at the bottom of her heart there was too abundant a fund of contempt for all fine ladies to permit her longer paying Mrs. Wentworth the compliment of caring whether she were in the room or not.

The glance of Mr. Wentworth's eye had, however, in it something that required all the force of her genius to meet without turning round and running out of the room; but she stood her ground with admirable steadiness, and while he, almost shuddering at the sight of her, was hastily meditating what was the most gentleman-like manner in which he could thrust her from his presence, she resolutely trotted up to the library-table, beside which he sat; and seeming wholly to have forgotten the manner in which their last interview ended, addressed him thus:

"Good-day, nephew Wentworth! You must not set me down for a gossiping morning visitor. I am not come to talk, I promise you; my time is rather too precious for that; I am only come to ask for the use of a book that is, of course, in your library. I want the seventh, eighth, and ninth volumes of Muddleton's Second Series of Essays on Population."

Mrs. Wentworth, senior, as the reader knows, was a *savante* of the first order in all matters concerning the toilet; and like the professors of every other science, her first glance of inquiry, on the arrival of strangers, was to ascertain whether they had any claim to be considered as belonging to the venerated guild of which she was a member. Mrs. Wentworth had never to her knowledge beheld this new aunt of her son before; and if his irritation at the sight of her could have admitted of increase, it would have received it from the manner in which his elegant parent now occupied herself in perusing the habiliments of one of his wife's nearest relations.

Her dappled grey hair, which was extremely thick, perfectly straight, and cut as if the edge of a bowl, placed upon her head, had guided the shears, was sheltered by a small, black beaver bonnet, which it should seem that she had outgrown; for it hardly reached her ears, and was only kept in the station assigned it by means of strings tied so tightly as to make her little round cherry-cheeks hang like bags over them. Her robe was of stout brown cloth, warm and substantial: but having been exposed to wind and weather during many winters, it had shrunk, till even her short little legs were left most cruelly exposed. Her shoes were such as economical young gentlemen go shooting in; her gloves large, strong, and very dirty; and round her neck she wore a huge tippet of coarse fur with a point behind, and two long much-worn tails before.

Mrs. Wentworth looked at her with an expression that seemed to hover between terror and risibility. This elegant lady was really a little near-sighted; but by no means sufficiently so to render the use of an eye-glass necessary, in order to enable her to scan, with sufficient accuracy, the singular figure before her. But Mrs. Wentworth, like a multitude of others of the same genus, derived a positive gratification from the fearless and unmitigated use of this little instrument, on an occasion like the present. Such persons politely feel themselves quite incapable of uttering any audible observations, or of even smiling, excepting very covertly, at the unfortunate *quizzables* in whose society they are thrown; nay, even a broad unvarnished stare is allowed to be objectionable. But the eye-glass does away with all these difficulties. It often speaks, with that most eloquent organ, of contempt and ridicule, and moreover in a language so perfectly

sanctioned by fashion, that not even the most refined can venture to censure it. So the dowager raised her glass to her eye, and kept it steadily there, without salutation or movement of any kind, till she was weary of witnessing an indifference under it, as genuine, if not as elegant, as her own.

Little as that lady suspected it, indeed, Miss Christina, in glancing a rapid eye over the elaborate toilet of the dowager, conceived for her a degree of contempt fully equal to what she inspired; nay, it is certain that Mrs. Wentworth's inward satisfaction at the conscious perfection of every part of her dress did in no degree exceed that of Miss Clark at the equally genuine conviction that no one but a woman of genius would venture upon wearing habiliments so eccentric as her own.

But while these little *feminalities* were silently passing between the ladies, Mr. Wentworth's entire system was undergoing the tremendous process consequent upon an access of passion that may not, or will not, relieve itself by words. His flushed forehead was stamped with the furrows of a frown as tremendous as that of Redgauntlet, while his pale lips quivered as he restrained the vehement expressions of wrath which struggled to escape them.

Miss Christina saw he was in a rage, but was determined to care not a fig for him; and her bravery certainly rose the higher, in proportion to the apparent necessity for it. Had her nephew, as she had dared to call him, only exhibited a reasonable degree of indignation at her cool impertinence, she would probably have quailed a little before it; or, at any rate, she would not have experienced that species of satisfaction somewhat resembling what a turnspit might feel if safely able to worry a mastiff, which now caused her openly to grin as she gazed upon him, and induced her to repeat her demand for Muddleton's Essays, with an air of such provoking fearlessness.

At length the incensed Wentworth found breath to express himself; and in such words, too, as he thought sufficiently gentlemanlike for the occasion.

"You must pardon me, madam," he said, "if I take the liberty of informing you that your greatly-to-be-lamented connection with Mrs. Wentworth neither does, nor possibly can, authorize or excuse this unprecedented intrusion. What your motives may be for wishing to treat me with ribald jestings and low-bred impertinence, I know not, nor am I greatly anxious to discover it. My part in the business will be confined to precautionary measures for the future. I wish you to know, madam, that my people will receive orders to prevent every annoyance of this kind for the time to come."

Notwithstanding the very large bee which buzzed incessantly



within the bonnet of Miss Christina, she was not quite a fool; and, moreover, was greatly more eccentric than ill-bred. This address roused all the common sense that lay dormant within her; and changing the grotesque sauciness of her manner into something more like the bearing of an ordinary little lady, she answered, "That you should be unable to comprehend the real uses of such furniture as this," waving her hand towards the well-lined shelves, "does not, I confess, sir, very greatly astonish me; and my visit and request may be alike unintelligible. But before you talk of low-breeding, young gentleman, I would advise you to recollect, if you can, who was your grandfather. Mine was a baronet of the creation of 1611, and equerry to his Majesty King George the Third, to boot."

Having said this, the little lady made a deliberate retreat, with the firm step and quiet self-possession which is apt to arise from the invigorating consciousness of having ended a dispute victoriously.

Victorious indeed it was! for had Miss Clark ransacked the vast collection of great and little insults over which the spirit of discord presides as a magazine from whence angry mortals may select the implements they wish for, she could not have found another that would have touched Mr. Wentworth so keenly. There was, as he often told himself, but one weak point at which the world could wound him—at every other he was cased in armour of proof; and this hated and despised old woman had touched him there, with an aim so true, and a sharpness so intolerable, that for a moment he was perfectly stunned by the unexpected blow.

For some minutes after she had closed the door behind her, Mr. Wentworth remained, with his right hand covering his eyes, as if they ached from what they had looked upon. His mother watched him, aware that he was suffering from the strugglings of suppressed anger; but by no means suspecting that the impertinence of the little mad woman had so completely overset him; and rather wishing to aggravate than soothe any offence received from Isabella's family, she said, "My poor, dear Marmaduke, I do indeed pity you! Gracious Heaven! what an infliction is such an inroad as this upon a man of your habits and disposition!"

Wentworth raised his head, and his mother started at the expression of his countenance, which showed a degree of suffering, as well as anger, greatly beyond what she could have conceived the scene could have produced. In fact, this deep feeling of perpetual regret at his plebeian origin was one upon which he had never descanted to her. He thought she would not sympathize in it—and perhaps he was right; for, despite her

pride and lofty bearing, her own progenitors were some grades lower in the scale of commercial dignity than those of her husband.

"My poor Marmaduke!" she repeated as she gazed at his agitated features, "is it possible, think you, that I should ever cease to regret a connection which has brought you in contact with this vulgar creature?"

"Vulgar!" he muttered through his closed teeth. "You are wrong, mother,—yes, very wrong, to increase my misery by thus descanting on it."

This was the first time he had ever uttered anything like specific regret at having married Miss Worthington, and her heart bounded with pleasure as she listened to it.

"Compose yourself, my dear Wentworth," she said: "if these disgusting scenes must recur, I suppose you must make up your mind to submit; but I confess my suffering is very great in being a witness to them."

Mr. Wentworth made no reply, but, hastily leaving the room, seized his hat as he passed through the hall, and strode forth to meet and greet the frosty air, which, after about two hours' walking, in some degree cooled the fever into which he had lashed himself.

Miss Clark, meanwhile, having found her way to the dressing-room of Isabella, entered it with an air of less vexation and discomfort than she might have displayed had she been less conscious of the value of her parting hit in the sharp encounter she had endured.

"Well, Isabella, my dear, I am come to wish you good-bye."

"Not quite yet, aunt, I hope," said Mrs. Wentworth, rising to meet her; "you have not yet said how d'ye do."

"O my dear! you must not stand upon ceremony, I promise you. Your elegant husband has fairly warned me off his premises, and given me clearly to understand that his servants are to turn me out, if ever I venture to come in again!"

"Good Heaven! aunt Christina," cried Isabella, colouring very painfully, "what can you mean?"

"Exactly what I say, Mrs. Wentworth, neither more nor less. Come, Margaret, put on your bonnet, child, and let us be off."

"Will you not tell me, aunt, what has happened to make you so angry?" said Isabella.

"I don't think I am angry. I am sorry, however, for your mother, and for Margaret, too; for I dare say they will both have warning to quit before long. But if your husband says anything to you about it, Isabella, just ask him, will you, my dear, to repeat my last speech to him?"

Margaret gave her sister a look which expressed a sort of merry dismay at the absurdities their aunt had probably been uttering; but it neither spoke, nor did she feel any portion of the grave sorrow which pressed upon the heart of Isabella.

"My dear aunt," she said, "let me entreat you not to take serious offence at anything which may have passed; it must be some misunderstanding, I am sure,—and, above all, do not say anything about it to mamma."

"That's a very queer request, my dear; but as to there being any misunderstanding, don't let that idea trouble you, for I think I can answer for it, that Mr. Wentworth did not misunderstand me at all. Come, Margaret, make haste, or I shall have the servants upon me, and perhaps the dogs too."

Isabella felt and looked inexpressibly vexed. She knew, though as yet Margaret did not, that there was quite as much to fear from her husband's ill-humour as from her aunt's absurdity; and trembled as she recollected that all the care she had taken to guard the peace of her family, by concealing his imperfections, might be henceforward rendered vain and useless by this most unfortunate *fracas*. It was, however, some comfort to her to perceive that her sister persevered in considering the whole as the natural consequence of one of their aunt Christina's outpourings, who certainly did now and then contrive to electrify the neighbourhood by some unexpected display of her peculiar doctrines. In truth, Margaret's heart was at this moment too full of the happiness she owed Mr. Wentworth to make it easy for her to allow that he could be wrong in anything. Something of this kind, which she whispered in Isabella's ear, did much towards quieting the alarm Miss Clark's unexplained displeasure had occasioned, and the sisters parted with the hope, cordially expressed on both sides, that they should soon meet again.

"Perhaps you may, my dears," said Miss Christina, nodding her head; "but take my word for it, these easy ins and outs won't last long. However, you don't seem to trouble yourselves much about my concerns, so I see no good reason why I should bother myself about yours. Give me a kiss, Isabella, and good bye to you."

## CHAPTER XX.

WHEN Margaret at length reached home after her long circuit, though weary in limb, and almost exhausted by her angry companion's ceaseless calls upon her "reallys!" and "indeeds!" as long as they remained together, she felt more perfectly happy than she had ever done in the whole course of her life; and the only drawback to her felicity arose from finding no one with whom to share it; for uncle David was fast asleep in his arm-chair, and the party were not yet returned from Taunton.

In such a state of mind as hers, however, solitary meditation is no disagreeable employment; and having dressed for dinner, that she might be in readiness to attend her mother's toilet, and first whisper the joyful news she brought in her ear, Margaret sat herself down before the fire, rehearsing in her mind the words in which she should communicate it on the morrow to her lover—in fancying what Charles would say when he heard that she was going to be married, and now and then listening with an impatient ear for the sound of the carriage-wheels upon the gravel.

At length that sound was heard, and in the next moment the voice of Charles also, who came bounding into the room in all the ecstasy of a happy-tempered lad at that happiest of moments, when he enters the paternal roof for the holidays. The clamour that followed awoke Colonel Seaton from his nap—brought old Hannah to the door, to get a shake of the hand from her darling boy—caused Neptune to spring from the hearth-rug to the shoulders of the noisy guest, and finally drove Mrs. Worthington laughing from the room, declaring that she would not return till the steam was let off, for that the hubbub was greater than she could bear.

It was not without a stout struggle, aided by the timely diversion of Neptune's renewed caresses, that Margaret was permitted to follow her; and then, within five minutes, Mrs. Worthington knew that as soon as Mr. Roberts died, Frederick Norris would be rector of Oakton,

"God bless you, my dear love!" said she, folding the happy Margaret in her arms. "You might, I doubt not, have found a match that would have placed you nearer in rank to your sister, but none other that could have made you a next-door neighbour.

What a happy mother am I to have both my darling girls within reach of me!"

"And is it not kind of Mr. Wentworth, mamma? I wish aunt Christina would not abuse him so; but it is plain her plans and her projects displease him; and she is so angry at it, that this morning she made Isabella quite miserable by abusing him."

"That is exceedingly foolish and wrong of her," replied Mrs. Worthington. "It is now more important than ever, Margaret, that he should become attached to us all; you will be living almost in his very garden, and it is next to impossible but we must be perpetually meeting altogether, just like one family. His mother is an odious person, certainly; and it is, and always has been, quite plain to me, that she violently dislikes the marriage her son has made; but this gives me little concern—on the contrary, the less she is with him, the happier will it be for Isabella: and the less she likes us all, the more probable is it that she will keep away. I am sure Wentworth suffers from her imperious temper, and that accounts perfectly for an air of occasional gloom and want of spirits which I have observed in him."

"To be sure it does," replied Margaret; "you know, mamma, I never could endure her, and I am certain Frederick Norris, with his sweet, gay, happy temper, will dislike her stiff and stately airs as much as I do. What time do you think he will be here to-morrow, mamma? How I long to tell him of Mr. Wentworth's kindness."

Fortunately the ladies had made good use of their time, and satisfactorily exchanged their hopes and felicitations with as little delay as possible; for the impetuous Charles was already at the door, declaring himself the most ill-used fellow in the world, because they would shut themselves up the very moment he came home.

"May I let him in, mamma, and tell him all?"

"I think you had better do it, and without delay, Margaret, or we shall certainly have the lock burst open," replied her mother, hastily concluding the business of dressing.

"Come in, Charles—mamma has got something to tell you," said Margaret, opening the door. He entered, sobered for a moment by his curiosity; but no sooner had he learned the news, than his delight at it was testified by every imaginable demonstration of whimsical joy. He bowed low to the blushing Margaret—caught his mother off the ground in his arms, and at length declared that having three such homes which he knew would be all squabbling for him in Somersetshire, he must give up all idea of going to Oxford.

"Break the matter to papa, mother, as skilfully as you can; but as to my curmudgering with any more Latin and Greek, it is

quite out of the question. My horses will be in Wentworth's stables, my dogs I shall lodge in that extremely nice kennel that young Roberts showed me at your parsonage, Margaret; I think I will still keep my partridges and rabbits here, mamma, because I have got everything so convenient; but as for my wardrobe, it must first be prodigiously increased, and then divided by three; while my poor person will, I doubt not, run considerable danger of being divided also, without the additional difficulty of making me go to Oxford."

But notwithstanding this "additional difficulty," one of the topics which added to the enjoyment of that happy evening was the certainty which many vacancies for the following year afforded, that Charles would "get New College," as the phrase goes.

"Reynolds will be off almost directly," said the young Wykehamist, continuing to discharge his budget of college news, "and Thompson and Feilding next. Then comes my turn."

"Reynolds? What, Alfred Reynolds?" demanded Margaret. "You do not mean that he is going to Oxford? why, he is a head and shoulders shorter than you are."

"God bless your soul! Mrs. Frederic Norris; he is very nearly, if not quite, as tall as your own beloved. Poor fellow! he has been growing tremendously fast since his illness, and the only fear is now, that he will become as much too tall and too slender, as he used to be to the contrary."

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Probably the expectant New-College man made up his mind that evening as to what he should do on the following day; but either from a discreet doubt as to his keeping in the same mind, or a misgiving that some opposition might follow the announcement, he said not a word of his purpose to beat up the quarters of his brother Wentworth before breakfast the next morning. Though he doubted a little as to the propriety of not remaining at home to shake hands with his brother in *posse*, he finally decided that his first duty was to pay his compliments to his brother in *esse*, and the decision being backed by a most ardent longing to embrace, felicitate, and quiz Isabella, in her character of married woman and mistress of a family, he started before eight o'clock that he might have the pleasure of ransacking the house till he found her dressing-room.

A little while after he had left the garden-gate, it occurred to him that a serenade would be the fittest thing in the world by which to introduce himself; whereupon, running back, he seized upon the guitar with which Margaret accompanied her songs, and which he had learned to touch tolerably well by the aid of a good ear; and sheltering it under the cloak which a cold foggy

December morning made necessary, he again set forth, as light-hearted a minstrel as ever swept the tinkling chords in honour of love and beauty.

Despite the heavy mist and rimy paths, the three miles which divided his home from that of his darling sister appeared that morning to Charles one of the most delightful walks in the world. As he entered the richly-wooded park, he paused to enjoy the winter picture, and almost doubted if the green drapery of summer could produce an effect so beautiful as the crisp hoar-frost that now incased every twig in silver.

"What a happy creature she is," he exclaimed, "to be mistress at eighteen of such a place as this! Dear, kind, generous Wentworth! How I love him! Not only the happiness of Isabella, but that of Margaret too, will be owing to him. I am a happy fellow to have such a brother-in-law!"

He now approached the house, and the sun having by this time pretty well won the battle he had been holding with the fog, the broad gravel esplanade before the principal entrance, with its surrounding shrubs, seemed dressed in a bridal robe bedecked with diamonds, and so enchanted the fancy of the boy, that, warm with youth, joy, and exercise, he abandoned the project of besieging Isabella's chamber door, and throwing his cloak round him in good Spanish style, with the guitar suspended by a rose-coloured ribbon about his neck, he played a spirited prelude, and then sang stoutly, clearly, and by no means without skill, that prettiest of morning ditties,

"My lady sweet, arise!"

Nothing could well be more theatrical than his appearance, as he thus whimsically presented himself before the principal windows of the widely-spreading mansion. His tall slim figure gained all it wanted in fulness of outline from his cloak; while his hat set *agee* on his bright black locks, and his instrument held with all the fantastic grace of playful puppyism, most strongly suggested the idea of a strolling player, and withal a very handsome one.

No sooner had the awakening words,

"Hark! the lark at Heaven's gate sings,"

been uttered by him, than three different windows showed heads in the act of listening. The one immediately above him was that of Mrs. Wentworth, senior, who, having just completed her exquisite morning toilet, was engaged in giving a few finishing instructions to Oldfield; for being quite sure, from her son's vehement indignation at the scene of yesterday, that her presence was no longer necessary to point out the pains and

penalties he had to endure from his matrimonial connection, she determined to depart, leaving him and his wife to the seclusion she had prescribed, while she went to display her elegance at Brighton.

This intention, however, had not been yet announced excepting to her confidential friend Mrs. Oldfield, and that skilful agent counselled her not to name it till some fresh inroad of the Worthington family should occur that might be stated as a reason for her abrupt departure ; thus leaving on the mind of Mr. Wentworth the strongest impression possible of her dislike to them.

When she looked down, however, upon the handsome minstrel, she little guessed how admirably he would furnish the event for which she was waiting. In fact, she did not know him, and no idea of the "parson's son" being suggested by his Don Juan-like appearance, she exclaimed, "Who in the world have we got here, Oldfield?" with more of admiration perhaps than any other feeling.

The old woman thus summoned to take her place beside the lady, though equally ignorant as to who he might be, felt greatly more disposed to judge him hardly.

"Who?" she scornfully replied; "whoever he is ma'am, you may depend upon it he has a dozen names, and not one of which he need boast. It is some strolling player from Taunton, I suspect; and the woman at the lodge would show that she knew her place better if she prevented such people coming in."

"That may be very true; but the young fellow sings extremely well, notwithstanding, and is handsome enough to perform before a more discriminating audience than he is likely to find at Taunton. How audaciously he reconnoitres all the windows!"

The next window in the range that showed an eye to look at him, was that of Mr. Wentworth's dressing-room. He, too, had just finished dressing; and hearing the song, threw up the sash to discover what it might be. But he was in no mood to judge either the music or the minstrel so favourably as his mother had done. Far from having recovered the scene of the day before, he was still tremblingly alive to offence of every kind; and this unlicensed approach of a person who could not be mistaken for a beggar, was fully sufficient to renew the irritation which had hardly slumbered, even through the tranquil stillness of the night. Without pausing to take a second glance, he turned fiercely to his servant, and said, "Go instantly, and send off that vagabond, and bid him beware how he enters these premises again."



Philip obeyed, and within two minutes had his hand on the shoulder of poor Charles, to enforce, though not very harshly, the pressing commands of his imperious master.

"You must be off, young man, and this very instant, too, or you will be treated roughly."

Charles turned his gay countenance upon the valet, and laughed.

"You will find it no joking matter, my man," said Philip. "It is not the fashion to laugh here when my master gives his orders, and if you will take a friend's advice, you will just turn about, and walk off peaceably, without having the dogs set at you."

"The dogs set at me?" cried Charles, turning somewhat fiercely to the servant. "Do you know who I am, sir?"

"No, not I. My master says you are a vagabond; and as he has said it, he will act accordingly, you may depend upon it: so get along with you, there's a good fellow, and don't let us have a row."

This well-intentioned remonstrance, which was uttered gently enough, was however accompanied by a second visitation of the valet's hand, which, as he knew himself to be within reach of his master's eye, he thought it discreet to apply in such a manner as to indicate that he was making an effort to turn the offender away from the place he so sturdily occupied.

It was at this moment that Isabella showed herself at the third window. Having in an instant recognized the voice of her brother, while still under the hands of Wilson, she exclaimed, "That is Charles! Make haste, Wilson; make haste! Fancy his coming here at this time in the morning, with his guitar, too! Poor dear boy! Give me my gown this moment. Never mind the curls. Is your master gone down yet, Mary?"

Wilson, who fully understood all that was passing in her mind, lost no time; and Isabella turning towards the window, while her maid fastened her dress behind, witnessed the seemingly rough treatment to which her brother was exposed.

"Good Heaven!" she exclaimed, "they are turning him away by force," and flying down the stairs, ran out by the door that Philip had left open behind him, and in an instant her arms were round his neck, and her lips fondly pressed to his forehead.

This was quite enough to atone to Charles for the unexpected affront he had received, and to make him perfectly happy again; but, Isabella, though she looked at his laughing eye and gay grimaces with infinite pleasure, and thought he had grown into the handsomest youth she had ever seen, could not overpower the fear that fluttered at her heart, lest Mr. Wentworth, from

whom the order for his expulsion had doubtless come, should not receive him kindly.

Her fears were not without foundation ; for never since Mrs. Wentworth's arrival had she seen him so completely and hopelessly out of humour, as since the departure of Miss Clark. What had passed between them she had no means of judging, for he made no allusion to it whatever ; but when his mother, with a sneer which spoke as much contempt as a sneer could speak, asked her if Miss Clark were not sometimes considered as a little out of her mind, he shuddered all over as if a pail of cold water had been thrown over him, and begged her, for God's sake, never to allude to the subject more. In the morning when they each went from their sleeping apartment to a dressing-room, they parted almost without exchanging a word, and how then could she hope that when they met at the breakfast-table he would be in a humour to welcome her darling Charles's first visit as she wished ?

" Shall I enter in character, Isabella ? " said he, adjusting his cloak and guitar. " If I do, it shall be to sing, ' Isabel ! Isabel ! Isabel ! ' " and he began to thrum the air.

" No, dear Charles," she said, gently taking the instrument from him. " Mr. Wentworth is not quite well, I think, and it may annoy him. We are very quiet, sober people here, you must know, and therefore I recommend that you appear in no other character than that of Charles Worthington, a Winchester pæfret, and my dearly beloved brother."

There was something in the tone with which she spoke, that sobered him directly. " Is Mrs. Wentworth here ? " said he, in a whisper, recollecting a sketch of that redoubtable personage contained in one of Margaret's letters.

" Yes, she is," replied Isabella, not sorry, perhaps, that part of the solemnity with which she knew he would be received, might be attributed to her.

They now entered the breakfast-room together, where the mother and son were already seated, waiting as it seemed for her arrival to begin the meal. She immediately took the hand of her brother, and leading him to the dowager, presented him to her, saying, " My brother, Mrs. Wentworth, who is just arrived from Winchester. It is nearly six months since we parted." Then turning to her husband, she said, " You know my brother, Marmaduke, do you not ? "

Mrs. Wentworth acknowledged the introduction by a stiff and silent bow, while her stately son held out two fingers towards him, but without advancing a single inch to meet him.

The youth coloured, and looked awkward, surprised, and abashed. The operation of thinking is indeed rapid ; for in the

space of about three critical moments, poor Charles ran over in his head all the fine visions he had formed connected with Oak Park, together with reflections on the effectual extinguisher which Mr. Wentworth's two fingers had put upon them all.

Isabella placed herself at the head of the table, and endeavoured to rally both his spirits and her own.

"You must be quite ready for your breakfast, Charles, after such a walk this frosty morning: you take coffee as usual, Mrs. Wentworth, do you not? and which will you have, Charles—coffee or tea?"

But not a syllable beyond what was absolutely needful followed either question, and a leaden silence seemed settling upon them all.

"What time did you get home, Charles?" said Isabella.

"A little after six, I believe," replied the crest-fallen minstrel, in a voice marvellously unlike his own.

"And found Margaret and dear uncle David impatiently waiting for you, I dare say—not to mention Neptune, who was, of course, as vehement in his embracings as of old."

Charles nodded and attempted to smile, but did not succeed well.

"Do you not think Charles is very much grown, Marmaduke?" said the persevering sister.

"I really am hardly a judge," replied Mr. Wentworth, without taking his eyes from the toast he was preparing for his mother; "but it's very likely, I think."

"Will you take some chicken, my dear Charles, or do you prefer eggs with your coffee?" said Isabella, while a feeling of painful swelling in her throat made her tremble lest tears should follow. But this would have been worse than anything that had yet happened, and she struggled with all her power against it.

"I do not see any newspapers," she said, "are they not come yet?"

Mr. Wentworth started;—"Very extraordinary, indeed!" said he; and abruptly rising from his chair, he stepped hastily to the bell, and rang it with great violence.

"What is the meaning of this insolent negligence?" he exclaimed with great vehemence to the servant who answered it, "where are my newspapers? and my letters, sir?"

The man waited not for further rebuke, nor did he dream of hazarding reply; but darting from the doorway, like an arrow from a bow, he reached the offices in a state of great perturbation, crying, "The newspapers! the letter-bag! For God's sake give me the newspapers and the letter-bag! Master's at it like everything, and I'll give either of you half a crown if you'll take them in."

The newspapers and letter-bag were thrust into his hands with all the haste of good will ; but a laughing voice called after him, "Catch us at that, Master Richard ; it's worth ten shillings, man, and hard-earned too."

There are some persons who greatly dislike being hit about the scone with words, or in common parlance, who hate to be scolded ; while others stand and bear the windy buffeting with wonderful indifference. The unfortunate Richard was of the former class, and literally shook as he laid the cargo of intelligence on the table. Though this action was performed with the respectful quietness which befits all services performed by the little for the great, the manner in which "poor Richard" turned to make his retreat had some symptoms of haste in it.

"Stay, sir !" pronounced in a tremendous tone by his master, made the man start, and turn again, with an action as involuntary as that of one who springs from the ground when he is shot.

Mr. Wentworth was too gentlemanlike a person to swear. No serving-man of his had ever felt his dignity increased by seeing that he had driven his great superior to the vilest resource for relief which impotent rage can resort to ; but his quickly kindled wrath was not without the means of showing itself. The sternness of his eye—the deep hoarse voice in which he slowly pronounced his reprobation of whatever galled his sensitive temperament, was, as Richard could have testified, ten times worse to bear, than all the rattling, rumbling oaths that ever were blustered forth by an ordinary swearer.

"How dare you turn to go till you have informed me of the cause of this audacious negligence?" said Mr. Wentworth, turning himself so completely round upon his chair as exactly to face the trembling culprit. "Am I to wait your pleasure, sir, for receiving my despatches? Am I to sit anxiously expecting their arrival, while you and your fellows amuse yourselves at chuck-farthing? or perhaps you dare to draw the papers from their covers that you may read the news before your master?"

"No, sir, no !" replied the man, more cheered than dismayed by the unjust suspicion.

"How dare you interrupt me, sir, when I am speaking? What do I care how your vile idleness is employed? Have I waited for my despatches or not? Can you say 'no, sir, no,' to that? I insist upon knowing, and you shall not leave my presence till I do know, what has happened this morning to prevent the letter-bag and newspapers from having been brought in as usual, at the same time as the hot water?"

"It was because they were not laid upon the dresser, sir, in the butler's pantry as they used to be," replied Richard.

"And you had not sufficient intellect to inquire for them."

"I never loses a moment, sir, when the bell rings to speak to anybody."

"And whose duty is it, pray, to lay these things upon the dresser in the butler's pantry?"

"It is Jem's duty, sir, when he brings them from the post."

"Send the boy in to me. But take care to return with him yourself. I will sift this matter to the bottom, you may depend upon it."

It may easily be imagined how much Charles enjoyed the excellent breakfast that was spread before him, while this agreeable dialogue was in progress, and how great a degree of enjoyment Isabella derived from this once fondly-anticipated first visit of her brother. Had she indeed still fostered the vain hope of continuing to make her family believe she was a happy wife, the sad expression of Charles's usually gay countenance must now have undeceived her.

"Jem is gone off again, sir, on an errand for cook," said the man; on which Mr. Wentworth replied,—

"Then remember that he is brought before me the moment he returns,—he shall be taught to know his duty better, or go back to the half-starved set from whence he came."

"Indeed, sir," said Charles, looking up from his tea-cup for the first time since the discussion began; "indeed, sir, I believe the blame is wholly mine. I came here this morning with my guitar to startle Isabella before she left her room, and your post-boy rode up just as I began to sing, so he stopped to listen, I believe; and this probably caused the blunder, which I hope you will have the kindness to forgive."

Mr. Wentworth bowed to him in return for this speech with an air of the most refined politeness.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Worthington," he said, "you have certainly explained the matter very satisfactorily. You may go," he added, throwing a glance of no very gentle expression over his shoulder to the footman, "but take care that the boy is brought into the library as soon as he returns. I must give the young gentleman a gentle hint," he continued after the man had left the room, "that he must be careful how he indulges his musical propensities at the expense of my convenience for the future."

Charles's heart sank within him as he listened to these words. He was sorry for the boy, whose attention he had unfortunately beguiled; but it was not this which caused him to cast the anxious glance towards his sister, which at once and for ever taught him to understand that she was unhappy.

Yet, just as was this miserable conclusion, he was in part mistaken as to the premises upon which it was founded. Charles

fancied that he had read in the stern frown with which this covert threat had been spoken, a purpose of mean and latent vengeance against the helpless dependant. But Philip knew him better; for when the footman upon his return from the parlour, repeated the order for the appearance of the boy, from which he had vainly hoped to save him by falsely declaring that he was not in the house, he added, "and poor little fellow! he will be sent to the right-about, you may depend upon it."

Upon which, the more experienced valet said, "No he won't, Dick. You don't know master yet, as well as I do. He isn't a bit likely to send the boy away, he isn't neither mean nor revengeful; but instead of having a temper like other men, he has got the devil in him, that never suffers him to rest himself, or let any one else rest either. He'll go on maundering at Jem, perhaps, every time he sees him, till something new turns up, and then it's likely he'll say that the boy's a very good boy, only that he's got such a terrible bad temper, and Jem perhaps having never opened his lips before him, for good or for bad, from this time to that; but as to his being so wicked as to turn the poor lad away, he is as little likely to do it as the meekest gentleman in the county."

Yet even had Charles heard this, and believed it too, it would not reasonably have furnished cause for much consolation. As a material of human happiness or misery, TEMPER is infinitely more important, because so much oftener brought into use, than high-mindedness. Opportunity for a generous action may occur perhaps once in a year; while temper is actively at work, for good or for evil, during every hour of our existence.

Gladly would Isabella have endured innumerable hours of fault-finding in private, could she thereby have prevented the disclosure of that morning. But the veil was lifted, and she could never hope again to be a source of happiness to those she had left in her dear tranquil home.

When the breakfast was ended, Charles rose to take his leave.

"Let me walk round the shrubberies with you first, Charles," said Isabella. "They are always swept while we are at breakfast, and the sun shines beautifully."

"I trust you do not think of walking such a day as this, Mrs. Wentworth," said her husband; "your carriage shall be ordered for an airing at any hour you may please to name, provided it does not interfere with my mother's luncheon, or any plans she may have herself formed for the morning."

The disappointed Isabella could only submit, and the darling companion and playfellow of all her happy days was permitted to depart without one word uttered of hope that he would return

again, or one moment of intercourse between them, excepting, perhaps, the cheering embrace received at the moment a menial was commanding him to quit the grounds, which had not a thousand times more pain than pleasure in it. And thus passed this first fondly-anticipated visit to Oak Park, to which the gay-hearted brother had looked forward for months, as the happiest epoch of his life.

He pressed his sister's hand, but said not a syllable beyond "Good bye, Isabella." Yet she was at no loss to understand all that was passing in his mind; and for the purpose of saying one mitigating word, followed him into the hall, when he went out. "Dearest Charles!" she began, in a low whisper at his ear, "do not judge hastily of Mr. Wentworth; he was vexed to-day about the letters, you know, and that ——"

"What am I to do with my poor guitar, Isabella?" said he, interrupting her, and fixing his eyes on the instrument that lay with its gay ribbons on a table, and seemed to mock him with its air of jubilee. "I am sure it will break my arm if I attempt to carry it back again this morning."

"I will bring it home some day in the carriage," said Isabella, making an effort to look at him cheerfully; but his eyes were full of tears, and silently wringing his hand, she turned away, and hastily mounted the stairs to her own apartments.

Of all the scenes she had yet been engaged in, this had been decidedly the most painful. She knew how dearly Charles loved her, and how, beyond any other member of his family, he had ever looked to her as the source and principle of all his happiness. Since her marriage, his letters had proved that this feeling was increased, rather than diminished, and that he still fondly clung to her as the person who knew him best, who loved him best, and whom he best loved. It was rarely that Isabella freely indulged herself in weeping; but she did so now, and she was paying for the weakness by a very miserable headache, when Wilson entered, and with a jerk, more indicative of discomposure than respect, threw a letter upon the table that stood before her sofa.

Isabella cast but half a glance upon it, but immediately recognized "a paper," and her heart sank within her. Feeling really ill, she determined to postpone the reading of it for an hour or two; but this cowardly device was rendered of no avail by her maid saying, as she turned to leave the room, "My master desires you to be ready to drive out with him in half an hour, ma'am."

"Then, come back to me in twenty minutes, Wilson," answered Isabella, meekly; and having waited till the door was closed, she opened the dreaded letter; sick at heart, and conscious that

the elasticity of her mind and spirits was gone, leaving her no power for any line of conduct more sublime than passive endurance. The "paper" ran thus:—

"My too anxious love and excessive kindness, Isabella, have for several weeks prevented me almost entirely from giving you the advice and assistance which you so sadly want amidst the embarrassments that ignorance like yours must occasion in so novel and unexpected a position as that in which you are now placed. I allude not to this ignorance, my love, from any intention of wounding your feelings—far from it. You must, I feel sure, notwithstanding the constitutional infirmity of your temper, be convinced by this time, that however I may be occasionally driven to utter painful truths, my fondness for you has never varied. Keep this ever in your mind, my love, and listen to me with the affectionate gentleness of a devoted wife.

"Your family, Isabella, has positively become the bane of my existence. It appears to me, I confess, quite impossible that you should not be aware of this; but my mother, whose judgment upon all subjects I consider as infallible, is of a contrary opinion, and constantly expresses her conviction that you believe their conduct to be perfectly unobjectionable in all respects. If this be so, Isabella, nothing in the world, not even your present very important and critical situation, could justify my longer concealing from you my sentiments on the subject.

"As to your father, I have at present little to say. Since the day that he so strangely misconducted himself at my table I have not seen him; for, unaccountable as it must appear, even to you, the fact is, that he has not thought it necessary once to call upon me since we returned from abroad. Of the old man, your great uncle, also, I might, were I so disposed—which Heaven knows I am not—I might, I say, complain that he too has treated me with a marked want of observance. I permitted you to include him in that general, or rather universal, invitation to dinner, which was given to the whole of your race, earlier after our return home than any other man would have deemed it possible to receive company. That he did not come—as I never affected to regret it—I will not now mention as a rudeness; but that he should not have waited upon me in a morning call is quite inexcusable, and the more so because whatever his birth and early education may have been (of which, however, I know nothing), his profession must have taught him, in some degree at least, to know what belongs to the manners of a gentleman, and what is due to the common etiquette of society.

"But it is not of omissions such as these, which, however offensive in their nature, can hardly be considered as of much importance by me, it is not of such negative acts that I complain. Let us pass from these, Isabella, to the goings-on of a far different description, which I have quietly endured for many weeks past from my tender fears for you. But my mother assures me that the period for such mischievous caution is now over, if, indeed, it ever existed; and I therefore hasten with my usual affectionate sincerity to open my heart to you on a subject equally important to the happiness of both. Is it possible, my dearest love, is it—let me seriously ask you—possible that you can be so utterly ignorant of all the observances indispensable in the higher classes of society, as to imagine that the daily running in and running out of a party of females, unrestrained by the slightest attention to the very commonest laws of civilized intercourse, can be proper? Isabella, my mansion has become, and must appear in the eyes of my servants, little better than an open bazaar, where all comers are welcome, and none excluded, let their appearance and bearing be as wild and indecorous as it may.

"I have never yet expressed to you the agony which the elder of your two maiden aunts caused to me yesterday. In the sacred retirement of my own library I was invaded,—I trust without your knowledge and connivance, Isabella,—by her entrance in a garb that certainly seemed to indicate insanity. This was painful to me, for my mother was present; and the incongruity, to say the least of it, of seeing two persons so remarkably contrasted thus brought as it should seem into the most familiar intercourse, was sufficiently distressing. But my mother behaved admirably: neither leaving the room, nor uttering a single word to me that might mark her displeasure and surprise.

"But this unauthorized intrusion was by far the least part of the offence of which I complain. I will not enter into the particulars of what followed; for,



though I trust your health is re-established, your spirits might suffer from such a detail as I could give of Miss Clark's language and conduct. It is enough to say, my love, that I forbid you ever to see her again unless by accident. My servants, of course, have received orders which will, I trust, render it very unlikely that such an accident should occur on my premises. To this subject I shall never allude again. Unlike you, my dear Isabella, whose countenance, I am sorry to say, too often shows some feeling like lurking discontent and melancholy after scenes that have arisen between us in consequence of my conscientious performance of my duty,—unlike you in this, my dear Isabella, I cautiously avoid renewing all painful subjects that have been once fairly discussed, and you will never hear me mention your Aunt Christina again.

"Now let us pass on to the unexampled adventure of this morning. In making you my wife, Isabella, I transplanted you from the rude nursery-ground, as I may call it, wherein you first bloomed, to the rich and highly-cultivated parterre that I trust you will long adorn. But let me pursue the metaphor, and ask if it be reasonable that every weed which grew beside you there should find place in my domain?

"I pray you open the eyes of your understanding to the lamentable effects which must follow if this goes on. To call your attention to it must, I think, be all that is necessary to make you see that everything I may do to prevent it, must be for your happiness as well as my own. Even were your family far superior in manners to what I have unhappily found them, I should still strenuously object to that sort of undignified amalgamation of two families into one, for which these eternal entrances and exits, with no more form and ceremony than others use in passing from one room to another, seem to indicate a decided inclination. How much greater then must my averseness to this unlicensed freedom become under the existing circumstances? Your father—totally devoid of the appropriate austerity of his profession; your mother—in dress and demeanour so sadly inferior to my own; your sister—imprudently attaching herself to a person of no consequence whatever; and, your brother—(I will study to preserve my equanimity of temper, Isabella, in speaking even of him,) your brother—presents himself before my doors in a masquerading garb, that would rather befit a strolling player than a gentleman, sets my household into the most disgraceful confusion by performing ballads for the amusement of one portion of my dependants, while leading another to commit the lamentable solecism of thrusting forth by the shoulders the brother of his master's wife. A most natural consequence, assuredly, of his having too successfully personated the character of a blackguard and a vagabond!

"I confess to you, Isabella, that all this is more than I can bear with calmness, and I really fear that my health will be the sacrifice if it continues. After the scene with your aunt yesterday the throbbing of my temples was fearfully violent; and to-day the unjustifiable vagaries of your brother have plunged me into a state of nervous irritation, which, if you love me as I must hope you do, would make you very miserable to witness.

"My honoured parent, Isabella, can bear these disorderly proceedings no longer. She has just announced to me her intention of leaving Oak Park; reluctantly confessing, as she did so, that not even her love for me can render it endurable under such circumstances. I will not enlarge upon the feelings to which this has given rise,—mortification is, after all, perhaps the most predominant. She leaves us on Friday next, and I can only find consolation in hoping that so severe but just a rebuke will affect you as it ought to do.

"Conquer, I beseech you, the natural violence of your temper, my dear love, and meet me immediately with all the grateful tenderness that I am conscious I deserve. I trust an airing in your society may tend to alleviate the painful symptoms under which I am now suffering.

"I am, my dearest Isabella,

"Ever your affectionate husband,

"MARMADUKE WENTWORTH."

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There are many miseries that would make a greater figure in history than any which have befallen my heroine, which, never-

theless, might occasion less total depression of spirit, less hopeless and helpless feelings of unhappiness, than she now experienced. It would be well if some philosophical moralist would tell us how a woman ought to behave when yoked to a temper in any degree resembling that of Mr. Wentworth; for it is an unfortunate fact, and in puzzling contradiction to that wholesome axiom, "Virtue is its own reward," that the sweetest, kindest, and gentlest spirits invariably fare the worst under such circumstances. Had Isabella been what is called a high-spirited, violent woman, it is probable that her liberal, gentlemanlike, and honourable husband might have been cured, after a few years' struggling, of those pampered vices of temper which now neutralized or smothered all his good qualities; and she might have remained, perhaps, a much happier woman than she deserved to be. But, as it was, all the gay buoyancy of spirit which nature had made so essential a part of her character, being joined with a tongue that could not scold, withered and died away within her, producing a sort of moral collapse that left nothing of life but the power of suffering and enduring.

"It is all over, then!" she murmured to herself, as the blighting paper fell on the carpet before her. "The soothing presence of those dear faces round me, for a few precious hours in every week, must be mine no more. Thank God!" she uttered, fervently,—“thank God! I did it myself! Had I been married—as they say some girls are—by the persuasion or control of my parents, it would have killed them. Dear father!—how earnestly his kind eyes looked in my face when he asked me if I loved him? He feared all this hateful finery had tempted me; but he was wrong. I did love him with tenderness, with admiration, and most perfect confidence; I loved him—and still I see his noble qualities, his fine intellect, ay, and his beauty, too. But, alas! alas! he will not let me love him—it is impossible, I cannot, cannot do it now!”

At this moment the punctual Wilson entered, and giving only one slight glance at her pale mistress, she proceeded, without waiting for orders, to bring forward all the rich appurtenances to a winter carriage-toilet.

Isabella spoke not a word, but stood up, and, without approaching the looking-glass, suffered the velvet mantle, the ermine cape, the plumed bonnet, to be put upon her, as they might have been upon a lay figure preparing for the *estrade* of an artist.

Wilson was vexed at her not speaking; for though there was no confidence between them upon the subject that chiefly engrossed the thoughts of both, she always waited with anxiety for the first sound of her mistress's voice after the reception of

"a paper" or the occurrence of any circumstance which led her to suspect, in domestic phrase, that "Missis had been scolded." She fancied that she could always judge from the tone how she had borne it, how painful the impression had been, and how far her most thoroughly-detested master (who, by the way, had never spoken a cross word to her in his life) had advanced in the operation of breaking her heart—a consummation that most of the household looked to as inevitable. But this perfect silence almost frightened her; and, in order to break it, she said pettishly enough, "I can't think, ma'am, whatever made you choose such a dismal-looking dress as maroon velvet; it is too old for such a young lady as you. I am sure you looked five thousand times better last winter in your straw bonnet and white ribbons and your pretty puce-coloured silk cloak."

"I was in better health, perhaps, last winter, Wilson, and then one looks well in everything," said Isabella; "but, if you like it, you may put my white veil upon this bonnet; for, I dare say, I do look rather deplorable to-day, for my head aches." The Brussels lace, which she hoped might conceal her heavy eyes, was brought; but, when she turned towards her maid to put it on, she perceived that she was in tears.

"What ails you, my poor Mary?" demanded Isabella, with all her former kindness of manner. "I hope nothing disagreeable has happened to you?"

"I am not thinking of myself, ma'am," replied the poor girl, sobbing; "but I am *very, very* miserable to see you looking as you do, and never opening your heart by speaking a word of what is in it to anybody."

When the spirits have been greatly tried, a very little will upset the trembling balance between restraint and no restraint; and the unexpected tears of her servant now produced this effect upon Isabella. She looked at her for a moment without speaking, and then, for the first time, giving way to the blessed weakness which has saved so many throbbing brains from madness, she threw her arms round the neck of Wilson, and wept bitterly.

"Better so—better so," sobbed the affectionate girl, venturing to encircle her young mistress in her arms,—"better so, ma'am, a thousand times, than to live on and never open your heart to no one!"

"God forgive me!" said Isabella, recovering herself, after a few minutes of violent emotion. "I know not how far it is a crime, Wilson, to own that you are right, and to confess that I am *very, very* unhappy."

"What crime can it be, my dear young lady?" replied the maid. "Do not torment yourself, ma'am, by thinking so. God

would never have made all creatures cling together, and find comfort in the midst of misery from talking to one another of their grief, if it was wicked to do it."

"Any other grief—any other misery," murmured Isabella. "But I have vowed to honour my husband:—and is it not a sin to own even to my own heart that I do not honour him?"

"I am too ignorant, ma'am, to talk and argue about right and wrong," replied the girl; "but it seems to me that there can be no great goodness in trying to tell lies to our own selves; and, besides, it could never answer any purpose at all; for I'm sure you will never persuade yourself that master's frowns and sullenness, that he can't hide if he would, and all his tiresome papers make you happy, or that there is anything to honour in it."

Before her mistress could reply to this observation, a knock was heard at the door; and Wilson, on opening it, received an intimation from a housemaid that the carriage was at the door, and "master waiting in the hall for missis."

"Very well," said the discreet Wilson, "my mistress will be down directly;" and, closing the door, she silently dipped a napkin in water, and offered it to Isabella.

"No, no," she cried, hastily drawing on her gloves; "I cannot stay for it—the veil will hide me;" and, running down stairs, she put her hand into that of her husband, who stood waiting for her at the bottom of the staircase. He handed her, without a moment of further delay, to the carriage, and, almost before the door of it was closed, he so settled himself in the corner of it as to command as full a view of his lady as her veil would permit.

"What makes you drive out with a veil over your face, my love?" he said, after a few minutes' examination. "Do you not think that you would get more air without it?"

"It is so very cold to-day," replied his wife.

"I beg your pardon, Isabella; but you really must give me leave to look at you;" and with an air half anxious, half gallant, he gently threw her veil back.

"It is, then, as I feared!" he exclaimed, with grave and sorrowful solemnity; "not all the proofs I have given of devoted love can suffice to a temper such as yours! I have written to you in the gentlest and most affectionate terms that it is possible for a man to use; and, because my necessary remonstrance has vexed your fretful and most unhappy temper, you come to me in tears! Gracious Heaven! what a fate is mine: a mother, to whom I am devoted, obliged to leave my house; and my wife, who, in spite of all her faults, and all the sufferings her connec-

tions cause me, I still so tenderly love;—my wife repaying the fond attention which has made me pace my hall like a dependant waiting for her—my wife now comes to me with her eyes swollen out of her head by weeping!”

“Let me hide my tears, Marmaduke, if they displease you,” said Isabella, again gathering the lace around her face; “but, surely, you cannot wonder that such a letter should draw them forth.”

“Not wonder, madam!—not wonder that all my forbearance, all the care with which, for my own credit as a gentleman, I avoided every word that could be thought harsh,—not wonder that such a communication should be received with tears instead of thanks? Isabella,” he continued, after a pause, “I do not believe another woman could be found whose arms would not be thrown round the neck of her husband, and her lips pressed to his, in tender gratitude for a letter so full of kindness as that which you have this morning received.”

Isabella felt that there was no word approaching truth that she could utter which would not increase his anger, and she therefore remained silent.

“And you will not speak to me!” he exclaimed, in a voice of vehement indignation. “Alas, Isabella, your unhappy temper gets the better of you! I do believe you have no power to conquer it; but, yet, my love, it is your duty to strive against it. Nothing, believe me, can so certainly undermine our happiness as your thus giving way to the sulky, sullen disposition which thus torments you.”

And in this strain he persevered to lecture her during an hour and half that he ordered the coachman to drive up hill and down for the especial benefit of her health and spirits, concluding the whole by a tender embrace, and handing her to the door of her dressing-room, on their return, with the heartfelt conviction of being the most devoted husband that woman ever had.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

LUCKILY for Charles, he was spared the mortification of having to give a narrative of the result of his morning exploit, by finding the whole family, on his return to the rectory, in a state of considerable agitation and excitement. Mr. Norris had arrived during his absence; and in return for Margaret's happy communication respecting the living, informed them that he had received a letter from Mr. Roberts, who, unconscious, poor man,

that his death was so confidently reckoned upon, had obtained the bishop's permission to try the effect of a milder climate, and now offered his curacy, and the use of his house, to his well-esteemed young neighbour, Frederick Norris.

Even before he learnt the effect of Margaret's application to her brother-in-law, the sanguine young man, had conceived a hope that this offer, including as it did many advantages, might induce the parents of his beloved to consent to their immediate union. The little patrimony, of somewhat less than three hundred a year, which, with her own small fortune, he proposed to settle on his wife, he urged would be quite sufficient for their moderate wants and wishes, and he pleaded eloquently in behalf of humility, and all the tenderest affections of the heart, *versus* prudence, patience, and the dreadful chance of never marrying at all.

Without the hope of Mr. Wentworth's living, his arguments would hardly have been found convincing, except, perhaps, by Margaret herself; but with it, the question was handled as all questions are when inclination is not combated by anything stronger than expediency; that is to say, every moment brought it more near to the designed conclusion. It was, however, at last the venerable Colonel Seaton, who put an end to all remaining doubts, by saying,—

“Let them marry, let them marry, for God's sake! Let us have a happy group to look upon! and who knows but poor Isabella may find comfort in their near neighbourhood?”

It was by this time pretty well understood in the family that uncle David had conceived a most unaccountable dislike to Mr. Wentworth; and though his avowed belief that Isabella must be unhappy, had been long combated by them all, the subject had of late been dropped between them; none having ever hinted either to him, or to each other, that any fear of his proving right had crept into their minds, yet none seeming inclined to discuss the subject further.

But when the old man thus alluded to it again, it was very evident that there was no longer the same ready contradiction on their lips. Margaret, indeed, whose heart was full of gratitude for Mr. Wentworth's recent kindness to herself might have been well enough disposed to renew her defence of him, had there been any leisure for it at this interesting moment, but there was not; for Mr. Worthington, having listened to his uncle's words, put a stop to all further discussion, by saying, with great feeling,—

“In God's name then, so be it!”

These words were no sooner pronounced than Mr. Norris testified his gratitude, and his exceeding happiness, with all the

demonstrative eagerness of an ardent and enamoured young man. It was at this moment, that Charles entered, and if instead of being, as usual, the most forward, and the most eager to hail the presence of joy and gladness, he was the least so, nobody was at leisure to observe it.

The arrangements for such a wedding as the one now under consideration, were of a nature as unlike as may be, to those attending the espousals of Isabella. Mr. Roberts's departure took place immediately, and a few short weeks sufficed for all preliminaries. In the course of these, the happy Margaret had but one drawback to her complete felicity, and this arose from the manner in which her sister had received the tidings of her immediate marriage; instead of its being welcomed with smiles and congratulations, poor Isabella received it with a burst of tears.

"O Isabella! are you sorry for my happiness?" said Margaret, hurt and surprised. "But I understand it; you judge now of everything by the scale which surrounds yourself. You think I shall be degraded by becoming a curate's wife. Perhaps, Isabella, you think by being so very near, that I shall degrade you?"

"Margaret! dear Margaret! I am not well," said Isabella; and then added with more composure, "You cannot so misjudge me long, dear sister; it is not in your nature; but you must bear with me. Everything like agitation overcomes me in a moment, now. God bless you, dearest, dearest Margaret! May you be happy as you deserve! I only wish that you all knew him better. Are you quite sure about his temper, Margaret?"

"What can you have seen or heard to make you doubt it?" replied her sister, more than half offended. "You did not use to be so unreasonably suspicious. Everybody speaks of him as one of the most amiable men in existence; and as a son, he has been most exemplary."

"As a son?" rejoined Isabella, musingly.

"Yes, Isabella, as a son. My father has heard this from the very best authority."

"Oh! do not think I doubt it; only there are so many other things."

"But is there anything so important? Have you not heard it said a hundred times, that a good son invariably makes a good husband?"

"Yes, I believe I have; nevertheless, if that be the only testimony to his temper, it would not satisfy me, Margaret."

"Then, I am quite sure there is nothing that would," replied the other. "But, own the truth, Isabella, I shall not take it

unkindly. Do you not think, in the bottom of your heart, that I am going to make an imprudent marriage?"

"From the bottom of my heart, I answer, no, provided you have good reason to be very sure that Mr. Norris has a good temper," replied Isabella; and as she spoke she blushed at her own eagerness.

The truth, or at least some part of it, now burst upon the mind of Margaret, and all resentment vanished in a moment; but she dared not enter upon the subject, to which it was indeed evident that Isabella was as averse as herself. After the silence of a moment, both sisters rose by a movement in which there was very perfect sympathy, and with a mutual embrace of most undoubted and undoubting affection, they parted.

Not even her own well-founded and all-sufficient hopes of happiness for herself could suffice to stifle the painful recollection of this conversation in the mind of Margaret: but it certainly served to strengthen the indifference, though this strengthening was not much needed, with which she contemplated the contrast that every circumstance in the preparation for her own marriage offered to that of her sister.

At length the day was fixed; the little parsonage had received the last affectionate touch of uncostly decoration for the reception of its fair mistress; the bridesmaids were appointed, and a written invitation despatched to Mr. and Mrs. Wentworth, requesting their company at the bridal.

At this time, the dowager Mrs. Wentworth had been gone for more than a month, and Isabella felt greatly relieved by her absence. Her husband seemed to think her a person of more consequence than before; and though no day, and rarely even an hour, passed without some indication of the temper of the man with whom she knew she was doomed to pass her life, her state of mind, even under the assured conviction that she could never know happiness, was more endurable than when the searching eyes of her mother-in-law watched all her movements. She had ceased also to struggle against the obstacles that divided her from her family, no longer seeking the dear familiar intercourse she had once hoped to enjoy, but submitting to give and receive such invitations, and no more, as her husband suggested and approved.

The happy bustle of preparation that was going on at Abbot's Preston assisted this heartless and hopeless sort of tranquillity; she had been permitted to dine there once, and Mr. Wentworth condescended to accompany her, upon the express condition of Miss Clark's not being of the party, and once the family circle, including the greatly sobered Charles, and the happy and grateful Frederick Norris, were received in state at Oak Park. Both



those perilous engagements, to which Isabella had looked forward with a degree of nervous trepidation that made her really ill, passed off better than she expected; stiffly, indeed, and without any mixture of enjoyment on the part of any person engaged in them, excepting the lovers, who, according to rule, thought little of anything but each other. They were followed, it is true, by a good deal of sarcastic observation upon all Isabella loved best in the world, and enough of reprimand to herself to prevent her forgetting for a single instant that her husband was an ill-tempered man; but she received no "paper" in consequence of either, and unrepiningly employed herself in beautifying baby caps, taking a daily airing, in which she was almost constantly accompanied by her spouse, and listening to his extremely monotonous voice, when he was in the humour to read aloud, which was not seldom, it being an occupation in which he took singular delight.

This tranquillity was, however, a good deal shaken by the arrival of the above-mentioned invitation to Margaret's wedding. To endure the annoyance of such an assemblage of kinsfolk and acquaintance, as would beyond doubt meet together on this occasion, Mr. Wentworth felt in an instant, was totally out of the question for himself; and, as is usual to all men of his temperament, he quite overlooked the possibility of his wife's feelings on the subject being in perfect contrast to his own. He therefore very succinctly declared his will, that she should write a "*civil*" note to decline it, stating her own health, as the reason for doing so.

"*My* health!" rashly exclaimed Isabella; "O Marmaduke! do not say it is owing to me. I would suffer pain and sickness willingly rather than refuse Margaret on such an occasion as this!"

It was the first moment he had ever heard the voice of his wife raised in opposition to his will, and the effect was well calculated to make it the last. He looked at her with a mixture of astonishment and rage, that made her feel in every nerve the imprudence of which she had been guilty, and she involuntarily raised her hands to her eyes, in order to shut out what she could not bear to look upon.

"My aspect blasts you, does it, madam?" he said at length, with an affected calmness that was terrible from its contrast to the look she had seen. "It may then be better for you to retire. Pray do not stand on any ceremony with me. Your freedom of remonstrance, indeed, on a subject where a husband, and an expectant father, *might* have hoped to have been listened to with something like deference, proves that there is no great danger of your being too observant. May I ask, Mrs. Wentworth, to

which member of your family I am indebted for the counsel that has regulated your conduct on this occasion? A young lady of your age could hardly, I think, have found courage—will you excuse me if I say *audacity*—sufficient to act as you have done, if not supported by the mischievous interference of others. I request you to be unreserved on this point. Perhaps it was your sister herself,—perhaps it was the future Mrs. Norris, who recommended this line of conduct to you?”

Poor Isabella saw all the danger that such a suspicion, if really felt, might bring on her sister, and eagerly answered,—“No! Marmaduke, no! She gave me no such counsel. The fault, the folly are my own.”

Isabella was both too right-minded and too honest, to have thus charged herself with a degree of blame which she well knew she did not deserve, had not her terror lest any idea that might endanger the hopes of Margaret should take root in the breast of her husband urged her hastily to say whatever was most likely to prevent it. But the effect of this was perfectly balsamic on the feelings of Mr. Wentworth: his wife had never shown herself in any degree abject before; and though this epithet, if whispered in his ear, would have been scorned by him with the greatest indignation, the idea sank deeply and soothingly into his heart, and had he uttered his thoughts at that moment, he would have said,—“How absolutely necessary it is for a husband to guard himself against the contemptible weakness of yielding to the whims and wishes of a pretty wife!—the man who does so, becomes a slave; whilst, on the contrary, I daily feel my power increase as it ought to do—and my love will unquestionably increase with it.”

“Compose yourself, Isabella,” he said, graciously taking her hand; “when you so candidly acknowledge that you are wrong, you disarm my anger, and leave me no other wish than to watch over you through life with the tenderest care. On no account whatever would I permit you to fatigue, harass, and agitate your spirits by being present at the marriage of your sister; make her understand this at once, if you please.”

Nothing was now left for Isabella but silent, unresisting submission; and even this did not prevent the return of that terrific black look before which she had learnt to tremble, when, on fixing his eyes upon her face as she turned to leave him, he perceived that her eyes were full of tears.

“Unhappy temper!” he exclaimed, as she passed out, and “a paper” reached her within an hour; which, though it shall not be inflicted on the reader, was as indicative of Mr. Wentworth’s peculiar modes of feeling and reasoning, as either of those which have preceded it.

It was upon this occasion that Mrs. Oldfield made one of her earliest efforts to deserve her promised annuity. She well knew, and there was hardly a servant in the house who did not, that another "paper" had been delivered to Wilson for the torment of her unhappy mistress; and she determined to appear before her under some idle pretence of asking for instructions at the moment that its effect was likely to be the strongest.

Having, therefore, just allowed sufficient time for its perusal, she knocked at the dressing-room door, and opened it almost at the same time.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said the old woman, relaxing from her usual rigidity of manner, and assuming at once a familiar and a friendly tone. "Oh me! oh me! what grief it is to see you thus! It is no good, ma'am, for an old family servant like me to put on a look of innocence and ignorance, as if I did not know what it was that made you seem so miserable. But, dear young lady, you must not let your spirits sink, or you will never live through it. I have known my master, ma'am, ever since the hour he was born, and you may trust me when I tell you that the only chance you have is to yield to him in nothing. Follow your own will, ma'am, in all things; but talk as little about it as you can; for it is words he can't bear, not actions, as my old mistress could have told you if she thought it right;—but I'm not his mother, though she is; and to say truth, my heart warms towards an innocent young lady like you, and there is nothing I would not do to help you."

Isabella was greatly surprised by this address, and felt it to be equally impertinent and unwelcome; but the age and venerable appearance of the speaker saved her from any harsher rebuke than might be gathered from the words, "I dare say you mean very well, Mrs. Oldfield; but, in my opinion, the conduct of your former mistress was more judicious than yours."

Want of apprehension was not one of Mrs. Oldfield's failings; she perceived at once that she had not only failed, but that every word she should utter in future would be received with great caution, and rendered useless by a feeling that nearly approached dislike; so, quietly stating the ostensible object of her errand, she only added, "I hope, ma'am, you will have the goodness to forgive my freedom," and left the room.

"That way won't do," muttered the old woman, as she closed the door, "but another shall—and she shall rue it, too, the stuck-up nobody, for lecturing her betters. If she were as wise as she is conceited, she would have listened to me; and when I had finished by gaining my own ends and parting her from her tyrant, she would have gained as much as if I had done it purely for love of her. Headstrong fool! let her go on at the rate

she has begun, and in five years she'll be in her grave—silly minx!”

Notwithstanding Isabella's reserve, Mrs. Oldfield saw enough to convince her that there was no danger of her speedily obtruding herself upon the presence of her husband, and the angry old woman hastened to take her revenge by immediately seeking an interview with her master.

Her long services, and the great esteem in which his mother was known to hold her, gave her important privileges in the eyes of Mr. Wentworth, and he had frequently permitted himself to converse and consult with her in a tone vastly different from that maintained with all his other domestics. She began as before with “I beg your pardon, sir, but I wanted to ask about the great plateau. The butler says,”—etc. etc.; and then stopping suddenly short, she added, “Pray forgive me, sir, for taking such a liberty, but I don't think you look quite well. Is there anything you would like to take? I am afraid you have got a headache, sir.”

“You are right there, Oldfield,” he replied; “but I think not that any of your decoctions would mend it.”

“Alas! my dear young master, I fear—I fear——”

“What do you mean, Oldfield?” sharply interrogated Mr. Wentworth, considerably alarmed.

“Not about your health, sir; not about your health,” replied the old woman, and stopped.

“Pray explain yourself, Oldfield. You are very disagreeably mysterious.”

“May I explain myself?” responded the housekeeper, advancing a step nearer to him. “May I open my heart, and run no risk of offending you?”

Her master's curiosity was too effectually roused to permit his refusing the promise of plenary forgiveness beforehand for all she might please to utter, having received which, she began with excellently well-modulated cant, as follows:—

“You don't know, Mr. Marmaduke, for you can't know, how dear to the heart of an old and faithful servant is the child she has cradled on her knees a hundred and a hundred times! Your own noble mother, sir, would hardly do more to secure your happiness than the poor old servant who is before you.”

As this was accompanied by an action of the hand across the eyes, which seemed to indicate considerable emotion, Mr. Wentworth still further calmed the terrors of his presence by saying, with great condescension, “Speak freely, my good Oldfield. I am too much persuaded of your attachment to my mother, and myself also, to take offence at anything you may say.”

“Then, sir,” responded the old woman with sudden blunt-

ness—"then, sir, I will tell you at once, that I do not think you are happy in your marriage."

Mr. Wentworth coloured violently, and said, "Speak plainly, and distinctly, if you please. I know not what you mean."

"Ah, sir! Is it not certain that your lady likes every one of her own family better than she does you? Is it not certain that she sits moping in her own room for hours together, when, if she felt as she ought to feel, she would be making the hours pass pleasantly to you? Is it not certain that the very slightest word you can say to her puts her in the pouts, and sends her up to cry and bemoan herself, as she is doing now to anybody that will please to come and listen. 'Tis her temper that is bad, sir, that is what it is, and it will make the torment of your life, if you don't learn to manage it."

This last hit was masterly. The old woman, as she often said, had not lived in the family for nothing; she knew that the persuading himself that everybody he quarrelled with was afflicted with a most unhappy temper, was the *panacea* which had healed all the secret misgivings he might have ever felt respecting the infirmity of his own.

"I am sorry to say, Oldfield," he gravely replied, "that your sagacity has hit upon the truth. Mrs. Wentworth, your present mistress, is a lady not only of distinguished beauty, but of great merit in many ways; and were not her temper unhappily such as you have hinted, my happiness with her would be complete. As it is, Oldfield, I must remember that no human beings are absolutely perfect, and that it is equally my duty and interest to bear with her defects in the best manner I can."

"That is just like you, sir, always good and great, and may you be rewarded for it as you deserve!" She then turned away as if, her full heart being relieved, she had nothing further to say.

"Stay, Oldfield," said her master, "you seem, I think, by your accent, to doubt the wisdom of the line of conduct which I have told you it is my intention to pursue. What other, my good woman, would avail me more?"

"It seems like presumption, sir, that such as I am should venture to give advice to you. Yet, in the bottom of my heart, I believe you want it. Your way, sir, is not the right way with such a temper as that of my mistress, and I will venture to say that, if you go on as you have begun, you will find her grow more sulky and discontented every year, till she is altogether too bad to live with."

"What is it you propose that I should do?" said her master, rather sternly.

"Remember your promise, sir," said the old woman. "It

would be cruel to make me speak out in this way if you cannot bear it without displeasure. Everybody sees, sir, how *very*, *very* fond you are of your beautiful young lady, and do you doubt that she sees it herself too? Ah, sir! our sex is never thoroughly well known except to each other, and I am very sure that your honoured mother would tell you the same, if she thought the doing so would open your eyes to the truth; only, like most other people, my old mistress fancies that what a person finds out of themselves, makes more impression than all that can be pointed out by another; but I am many years her senior, and I think otherwise, as I often told her before she was driven away from this place."

"Has my mother then spoken to you, Oldfield, on the subject of my wife's temper? I am surprised at this. Surely there is nothing in her temper to justify such consultations respecting it."

"Did your mother speak to me about it?—and does this offend you, sir? Your mother is counted to be a proud woman, Mr. Marmaduke; but she must be prouder still, before she disdains to listen to the voice of her old faithful servant," and again Mrs. Oldfield's eyes were subjected to a gentle friction from her fingers' ends.

"It is not on that score that I feel any surprise about it, Oldfield," said her master, mildly, "as I think you might perceive by my conversing with you thus myself; but I certainly am surprised that my mother should have thought anything in the conduct of the present Mrs. Wentworth deserved such a discussion as you seem to have held together.

"I can only, say, sir, in reply, that my old mistress appears to have been right as to the uselessness of talking to a married gentleman on such a subject." And so saying, she waited not for any reply, but glided from the room, before the mystified and puzzled Wentworth could at all understand whether there was much or little left unspoken by her, in consequence of the check she had received.

Most true is it that a slanderous word never wholly loses its effect, however false, nay, even however absurd it may be. The ears that receive it, perhaps unwillingly, retain it involuntarily; and often though disbelieved, it suffices, like idle breath upon a mirror of steel, to leave some specks of rust upon the brightness that it cannot effectually obscure.

Mr. Wentworth remained fixed in very grave meditation for a long time after the housekeeper had left the room. In his inmost heart and soul he knew his gentle wife deserved no such reflections upon her temper; and though the singular obliquity of his conscience on such points made him reserve as a clause in

the sentence his judgment passed upon her, the saving parenthesis (*except to me*), he could not but feel that both mistress and maid had accused her unjustly. This was the conclusion to which he came at the end of the first section of his reasonings on the subject. The next began by a mental inquiry as to the reasons which two such very respectable witnesses could have for judging her so much amiss; and here the absence of any perceptible fault in the conduct and character of Isabella proved strangely adverse to her interest. Because he could accuse her of nothing that he had seen, he began to suspect that there must exist something that he had not; and all that thus gleams upon us, shapeless and undefined, ever seems fraught with mystery and mischief. For a long half-hour he was really very miserable from the effect of these shadowy imaginings; which, having no foundation, rested upon the mind that formed them with most oppressive weight. But there were some qualities in the mind of Mr. Wentworth perfectly incompatible with the continuance of doubts so groundless and unjust; and before he left the room he had dismissed them with a firmness of disbelief that did honour to his candour. Yet he could not forget what he had heard; and never after did his miserable temper lead him to express unjust displeasure against his unoffending wife, without his laying to his heart a plentiful unction of self-applause for the manner in which he had resisted the insinuations made against her; and often when in a paroxysm of unprovoked anger, his vexed spirit turned hither and thither to find excuse for it, he found relief from deeming her ungrateful for all the noble confidence he had shown.

Meanwhile, he so uniformly enforced his own will in all matters both great and small, that Isabella by degrees seemed to forget that she was born with any of her own. It was sad to watch the result of this species of systematic submission on her pale but lovely countenance; the spirit that used to animate every feature seemed asleep. Her eyes could not lose their rich dark colour, nor could the regular contour of her sweet face be changed by it; but the movement, the endless variety of expression that had made their greatest charm, was utterly destroyed and extinguished.

There was nobody now to watch her fondly through every hour of the day, and gather sunshine, as Alfred Reynolds once expressed it, from her smiles,—if there had been, they would have perceived but one expression left to vary the sad stillness into which her features had sunk, and this was terror. The word is strong, perhaps, when used to express a feeling produced solely by the apprehension of gloomy looks and captious words, yet none other can convey what Isabella felt, when her short

intervals of tranquillity were threatened by a coming storm. Such a companionship as hers with her husband must have destroyed the happiness of any woman; but such deep misery as she suffered from it could only be felt by one whose domestic happiness had been as perfect as hers while she remained the "darling Isabella" of her own sweet-tempered family.

Yet, the man who caused this miserable change had not a vice, saving his ill temper, and his overweening opinion of his own excellence!

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## CHAPTER XXII.

THE bridal-day of Margaret came bright in winter sunshine; and though unmarked by any pageantry more brilliant than that of the holly-leaves, and their coral berries, which in default of fairer flowers the village children strewed before her, would have been one of almost perfect happiness, for there was no parting to dread as its consequence, had it not been for the absence of Isabella. The vague fears which, almost immediately after her return from Paris, had begun to haunt, with more or less strength, according to their respective characters, the minds of all her family, had now grown in the opinion of each into a dreadful certainty. Their Isabella was unhappy. This sentence, which for a long time they had not dared to speak, was first pronounced by Charles, whose uncontrollable emotion, as he uttered it, would have left it unintelligible, had not each one of his hearers anticipated his meaning.

It would be difficult to say which one most suffered from the misery it brought. The hearts of both father and mother were wrung with a feeling nearly akin to remorse, as they remembered how proudly, how delightedly, they had welcomed the splendid proposals of Mr. Wentworth. Margaret felt her own happiness half blighted by Isabella's want of it; while Charles seemed to have lost all inclination to amuse himself, and, from the merriest fellow that ever made a paternal roof ring with holiday frolics, he became one of the very soberest, taking to walks as long and as solitary as those he used formerly to reprobate as the sulky resources of his friend Alfred, and shunning all talk of horses and dogs as scrupulously as if the naming them would make public to the whole country the disappointment of all his ill-founded hopes. Not, indeed, that it was the disappointment of these hopes which weighed so heavily on his gay temperament; a thousand such would have been borne, and their conception laughed at, with the true spirit of fun, contentment, and



good-humour, had Isabella's peace been uninjured. It was the remembrance of her dear, pale, melancholy face that haunted him; and, during the short interval that remained of his careless, laughing boyhood, he never again enjoyed the lightness of heart which had formerly been his most remarkable characteristic.

The sadness that, from the moment Isabella's marriage was arranged, had settled upon the spirits of Colonel Seaton, was but little increased by the observations he made afterwards. It was in vain, indeed, that the family avoided all allusion in his presence to the name of Wentworth, or the once-vaunted glories of Oak Park; their silence itself was enough to prove to so keen an observer that all he had feared was come to pass. He had ever been a practical physiognomist; and, without puzzling himself by any scientific jargon, seemed gifted with an instinct not given to all, that would not let him be deceived in the character of his fellow-creatures. But although throughout his life he had been himself guided by this, more, probably, than he was even himself aware, he never brought it forward, knowing that it was considered as fanciful, and feeling that it might be so; nevertheless, it had sufficed to make him very sure that the beloved little girl, who had thrown so much of her own brightness on his aged hours, had exchanged peace for splendour when she married Wentworth.

The spinster sisters of Appleton, however, long remained convinced that the want of frequent and kindly intercourse, which they could not fail to remark, arose entirely from what had passed between Mr. Wentworth and Christina. Far from rejecting this interpretation herself, the theoretic lady felt rather proud of it, and severely chid her gentler sister for her lamentations upon an estrangement which she declared to be far more desirable for all the family, than any intimacy with so benighted an intellect.

"Well, well, Christina," said Miss Lucy, "these sorts of notions may be very natural for such clever people as you; but it brings poor comfort to me, who used to see Isabella two or three times every week. However, she will never forget her old friends, or cease to love us, I am very sure of that; and, let Mr. Wentworth be as angry as he will, I am quite determined she shall put my work in her drawing-room. Dear soul! I know she will never look at my little girl and her rabbit without thinking of poor aunt Lucy."

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Months wore away with very little alteration in the tenor of Isabella's life. The few distant neighbours they received constantly offended Mr. Wentworth by the tone of affectionate

kindness with which they addressed his wife; and this always seeming to leave him alone beneath the gloomy shade of his own stateliness, he declared that he considered all country visiting, with its early hours and gossiping intimacy, as a sad inroad upon the domestic happiness he desired to cherish; so, having once permitted every family on their visiting list to contemplate the splendour of his paradise, he pretty resolutely shut the gates of it against them all for the future.

To her parents' dear familiar residence she was become almost a stranger, every invitation after the first being uniformly and systematically declined; while her mother's visits, though still occasionally permitted, on account of the use her son-in-law conceived she might be of in his lady's approaching confinement, were never suffered to pass without being so commented upon as to prove that they were, as well as every visit from Margaret, brought to a strict numerical account, the sum total of which being brought not unfrequently before the eyes of Isabella, by means of the "paper" communications, which rather increased than diminished in number as time wore on.

It would not, however, be doing justice to Mr. Wentworth, were it denied that, had he known the extreme suffering they occasioned, they would have been less so.

As to Margaret,—though the affectionate wishes of both sisters had been fully gratified by the local position in which they found themselves relatively to each other, nothing could more plainly prove the vanity of human wishes, even when indulged, than the result of this greatly-desired arrangement. Fate seemed to have kept her favouring promises to the eye, but to have broken them to the sense; for, so effectually did the austere coldness of Mr. Wentworth check all advances to familiar intercourse between his stately mansion and the humble parsonage, that they could never meet without permission asked and obtained by Isabella for the indulgence; and this, if desired more frequently than he approved, never failed to produce a "paper" as its punishment, which very effectually turned the pleasure into pain. Though it is necessary, in order to avoid intolerable tediousness, that these "papers" should generally be omitted, a passage from one of them shall be given, to show how well poor Isabella was reasoned out of natural affection into conjugal duty. The "paper" began—as most recent ones had done—by lamenting the necessity which forced him, so greatly against his inclination, to address her in a style which her present situation would have rendered it desirable, if possible, to avoid. "But necessity," it proceeded, "recognizes no law; and I, like every other human being, must submit to it. Nothing, however, but a perversity of temper, greater than I look for even in you, my poor, dear

Isabella, can convert what I am going to say into a source of pain. Listen to me with the gentleness and the respect I deserve, and you must become sensible of the kindness, as well as the necessity, of my remonstrance. You cannot be wholly ignorant, Isabella, that the organization of human society demands a gradation of classes which can never be broken in upon without danger. You may perhaps reproach me with having infringed this necessary gradation by selecting you for my wife, and I will not deny that there may be some ground for the accusation. Yet, in this case, remember that a man, let his rank be what it may, has the power of raising the woman he marries to an honoured, if not exactly an equal, place beside him; but that in no other instance can the same, or in any degree a similar, result take place. Could I, if my life depended upon it, Isabella, place the curate of Oakton on a level with myself?—and, if not, can you, by the most obstinate perseverance of opposition to my will, raise his wife to an equality with mine? If not—if your common sense and your common honesty force you to acknowledge this obvious truth—tell me, I pray you, on what principle it is that you conceive yourself justified in standing in the presence of my gardener to gossip over the shrubbery-fence with Mrs. Norris—looking both of you like the wives of a couple of peasants at the doors of their respective huts? Think not, I beseech you, that I have deigned to question any domestic on this disgraceful subject—I am incapable, from any motive, however praiseworthy, of acting thus. No!—this singular forgetfulness of propriety was witnessed by myself. I heard, on my return from my ride, that you were walking in the shrubberies; and, with my usual devotedness of affection, I went out to seek you. Alas!—what did I find? Was the wife I have selected from among the numbers who have made it obvious that they wished my alliance, enjoying, with becoming dignity, the privilege of knowing herself the mistress of the lawns and groves among which she wandered? Was the mother of the heir that Heaven has promised me profiting by the mild warmth of the season, and consulting the health now so doubly, trebly, precious to me by taking exercise? Was it thus I found her? No, Isabella, it was not! But where shall I find words to paint the deplorable contrast with the strength I feel it? In a dark, damp, obscure corner of my premises, where, instead of the well-swept walks that have been prepared for her feet, a heap of rotten reeking leaves forms a mass but little different in its nature from a dunghill, stood Mrs. Wentworth, wrapped in a cashmere drapery that accorded equally little with the position she had chosen, and the appearance of the very properly-habited curate's wife, with whom she was conversing.

Can you wonder, Isabella, that I should have turned back, sick at heart, and perfectly incapable of presenting myself as a third in such a scene? Most unwillingly—particularly at this time—would I resort to the harshness of a positive command, in order to avoid the recurrence of this disgraceful indecorum; but it is in vain to conceal from you that, if all other means fail, I must have recourse to measures which will place Mrs. Norris at a safer distance. Mr. Roberts is still alive, and too grateful for the favours bestowed by my family to retain a stipendiary whose vicinity interferes with my happiness.

“Think well of this; but let me not see, when we meet, that your temper is thrown into sullenness and gloom by a remonstrance so imperatively called for, and offered with so much gentle forbearance.”

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*The gentle forbearance*, however, was not sufficient to prevent this “paper” from having a very serious effect upon the hapless lady to whom it was addressed; the threat of removing Mr. Norris, which appeared, of necessity, to involve the revocation of the promise, on the strength of which her sister had married, caused such an emotion throughout her frame, that she fainted for the first time in her life.

Wilson, who, since the involuntary confidence reposed in her, had constantly ventured to linger either in the bedroom or dressing-room after being the bearer of one of these ominous despatches, perceived the sudden paleness in time to prevent her falling; but totally unused to the sight of syncope, that frightful stopping of the heart which mimics death so closely, she became more terrified than the occasion called for; and being as she stood, with Isabella’s unconscious form supported against her, within reach of the bell, she rang it violently, alarming thereby every person within reach of its sound, and Mr. Wentworth among the rest.

Mrs. Oldfield, as well as one or two inferior servants, hastened to inquire into the cause of this violent summons; but the terrified husband was before them all, and by the time they arrived he had already raised her in his arms, and was conveying her to her bed in the adjoining room.

There was not another person in the house, excepting the austere housekeeper, whose entrance the terrified Wilson would not have hailed with thankfulness; but it was grudgingly that she yielded up her mistress to the man whom she had long looked upon as a tyrant, destined to send to an early grave the kindest and most unoffending of God’s creatures. To resist his interference, however, was out of the question; and she followed

with gloomy looks and streaming eyes as he bore her tenderly along, and laid her, as gently as a mother could her darling child, upon her bed.

It required a feeling as strongly indignant as that which swelled within the breast of Wilson to witness the manner in which he hung over her, and yet remain convinced that he was the sole and only cause, not of this temporary fit alone, but of all the suffering that had already faded the beauty, and utterly extinguished the young happiness, of the pale girl, that to the waiting-maid's terrified fancy seemed already stretched lifeless at his feet.

Yet no feeling could be more sincere than that which now made him fix his eyes upon Isabella, watching for returning life as if his own must follow, if hers were gone for ever. No doubt rested on his mind that the letter he had sent her was the cause of her fainting, and he wished perhaps that it had been better timed; yet, so true to itself is ever the ruling passion of our nature, that no pang of self-reproach followed this conviction. He felt as a skilful self-assured surgeon might do, at seeing his dearly beloved wife suffering from the effects of a necessary operation, anxious, and sympathising, but not a whit repentant.

But it was nevertheless with genuine tenderness, that had no mixture of self to alloy it, that, when Mrs. Oldfield, with much bustling importance, made her way to the scene of action, pushing aside Wilson, who stood bedewing the hands and face of her mistress with Cologne water, he interfered to prevent her taking this office upon herself. He remembered that the old woman disliked her mistress, and at that moment he desired not that she should approach her.

"Let Wilson keep close to her mistress, Oldfield," he said; "she is more used to her attendance; and do you instantly send off a man and horse to Taunton for Mr. Richmond."

The old woman looked at him with a speculating glance, whose meaning he neither understood nor cared for, and without speaking a word, left the room.

In a minute or two Isabella opened her eyes, and at first looked puzzled and almost frightened at seeing her husband standing beside her.

"You have fainted, my dear love," he said in answer to her inquiring look, "and must keep yourself very quiet till Mr. Richmond comes."

"Fainted?" repeated Isabella, drawing a deep sigh, and closing her eyes again, she lay as motionless as before; the only sign of recovered consciousness being given by tears that silently stole from beneath her eyelids.

"My mistress ought to be quite alone, sir," said Wilson with the authority of an experienced waiting-maid; and gently drawing the curtains round the bed, and letting down the window-blinds, she gave Mr. Wentworth very intelligible notice that he must depart.

There is hardly one man in a thousand who has courage to resist this species of control; even temper seems rarely to interfere with the obedience manifested by all persons of the masculine gender, the moment a woman installs herself in a sick room, and utters her decrees in the character of a nurse. Mr. Wentworth had, however, already remained long enough to perceive that, though perfectly motionless, his wife was no longer insensible; and this enabled him so completely to recover his own equanimity, that he decided there must be a lamentable mixture of temper in the emotions which had so disordered her; for he had watched the tears continue silently to well forth, there being no strength left to check them; and it had long been an established article of belief in his mind that, whenever Isabella wept, it was because she was the victim of habitual ill-humour.

As soon as he had closed the door behind him, Wilson opened the bed-curtains; and taking Isabella's cold hand in both hers, whispered gently, "Dear, dearest lady! there is nobody near you but me."

Isabella again proved the return of life by breathing a long deep sigh; but remained motionless and silent for some minutes longer, retaining the hands of Wilson by the grasp of her own. At length she said, "I am not well, dear Wilson. Go to him, and tell him so. Tell him I am in pain, and ask permission to send a carriage for my mother. Do it all quickly. Do not stay from me."

Wilson obeyed with great celerity, which met no delay from her master; for the request, and the reason for it, were no sooner spoken, than he rang the bell violently, and gave the necessary orders himself, strongly enforcing the necessity of speed, and even following the man into the offices to ascertain that the despatch had already departed in search of the medical attendant from Taunton.

On returning to the chamber of her mistress, Wilson found her in a state that alarmed her greatly; and knowing that with all the speed that could be made, more than an hour must elapse before it was possible Mrs. Worthington could arrive, she said:—

"May I run myself, ma'am, and fetch Mrs. Norris? I should not be gone two minutes."

Isabella's only reply at the moment was catching hold of the

dress of her servant, and holding her with almost a convulsive grasp; but the suffering which prevented her speaking having passed away, she pronounced with great earnestness, "Not for the world, Wilson!" a sentence which puzzled the poor girl's reasoning faculties as effectually as the symptoms of bodily suffering baffled her experience. She did not, however, contest the point; but having given a moment's meditation to sundry pros and cons on the question of summoning the old housekeeper, or remaining alone with her mistress, she decided upon the latter, and kneeling upon a footstool beside the bed, continued to watch her with great anxiety, till the arrival first of Mrs. Worthington, and then of the medical attendant, turned her ignorant fears into the alarming certainty that a premature confinement might be expected.

When this intelligence was announced by the apothecary to Mr. Wentworth, a sharp pang shot through his heart; and for about a minute and a half, he was very near reproaching himself for having written "the remonstrance," which he could not doubt had rendered that event thus alarmingly premature, to which he had looked as the great object and end of his dearest hopes. But long before the process of self-accusation had reached the point at which repentance and a chance for amendment might begin, the unwonted process became so intolerable, that by a sudden effort of his will, made easy enough by habit, he turned the tables against the poor sufferer, and soon worked himself into a paroxysm of indignation against the temper that could become thus violently irritated at a representation so temperate and so reasonable as that which he had penned.

Mrs. Worthington remained stationary in her daughter's room, so he could not relieve his feelings, as he probably would have done had she been within reach, by dilating on the defective nature of that education which had left his wife so incapable of all self-control; but in the state of anxiety into which this news had plunged him, solitude was intolerable, and he ordered Mrs. Oldfield to come to him.

The old woman obeyed the summons as slowly as was at all consistent with etiquette, and entered the library, having her long lean arms crossed before her with such rigid stiffness, as to make her master fully understand she had not forgotten the cool reception he had given to the late outpouring of her affectionate feelings towards him.

He was at this moment in a humour to think he had been to blame in this; and wholly throwing aside the usual stateliness of his manner, he said—

"This is a very distressing business, Oldfield, is it not?"

"Certainly, sir," replied the housekeeper.

"But, after all, Oldfield, many children born at seven months live, do they not?"

"Yes, sir," pronounced the propitious oracle; adding, however, after a short pause, "but it depends greatly, I believe, on the causes that may have produced the accident."

"In this case, Oldfield, depend upon it that it was ill-temper, and nothing else," said her master, looking at her with evident hope that she would declare this to be very likely; but he was not yet forgiven, and she only replied,—

"Has my mistress, sir, suffered from anybody's ill-temper?"

"From her own, Oldfield—from her own. It is but too true! From an old and faithful servant like yourself, I will no longer pretend to conceal it. The temper of Mrs. Wentworth, as you truly said, is such that, if not corrected, it must destroy herself and me."

"I am sorry, sir, that you have found my words so true. There will be but one remedy in the end, and that I have long seen," replied Oldfield, softening into a tone of respectful compassion.

"A remedy! what remedy? What hope is there that a temper which cannot bear the slightest word, even from a fond husband, should be capable of cure from any remedy?"

"Alas! sir, though the case is a common one, the only cure that I know of is hardly yet made easy. But this is no time to talk on such a subject. I know your heart is thinking of the precious child whose existence even now is in peril from the calamity you have mentioned; and, indeed, sir, you must keep your mind in a state to bear whatever misfortune may follow."

"Then you think there is little or no chance of the child living, Oldfield?"

"God is merciful, sir, and may think you have suffered enough already; but I certainly have heard it said that nothing is so fatal to an infant, either before birth or after it, as violent temper in the mother."

"After the birth? I do not understand you; if the child be born strong and well, how can the mother's temper affect it afterwards?"

"You forget, sir, the office of nurse, which most ladies nowadays choose to perform themselves. There can be no doubt that the health of the child depends, in a very great degree, upon their state, both of mind and body during this period."

"True, true,—I had overlooked this after-peril. I suppose they will let me know, Oldfield, as soon as the event takes place?"

Mrs. Oldfield produced a slight smile that was very full of meaning.



"I don't know, sir," she replied. "The pleasure or pain, as it may be, of making this announcement will probably rest with Mrs. Wilson."

"And she can bring a message, I suppose, as well as another?"

Mrs. Oldfield smiled again, but said nothing, and seemed occupied in removing with her apron a few particles of dust that had settled on one of the volumes which stood on the library-table.

"I wish you would not smile in this sort of way, Mrs. Oldfield, instead of answering me," said her master, with a gathering frown.

"I beg your pardon, sir!—indeed, I was hardly knowing how I looked. But I don't think Mrs. Wilson, sir, *would* be over-much in a hurry to do any errand that you are anxious to have done."

An expression of gloomy displeasure took possession of Mr. Wentworth's countenance. "Mrs. Oldfield," said he, with much solemnity; "I am not, as you must well know, much given to listen to gossip in any quarter, and much less to encourage its being addressed to me by my servants. But observe if you, in the privileged character of an old retainer of the family, have information to give which you deem it right that I should receive, it must not be delivered by smiles, and sneers, and innuendoes, but spoken honestly and plainly, or not at all. What is it you mean by saying that the young woman who waits upon my wife would be unwilling to do an errand for me?"

"I don't think I quite said that, sir. Of course, Mrs. Wilson would, like every other servant in the house, be proud to wait upon your commands; only from her way of speaking, and tossing her saucy head about at times, I don't believe she would care much about your anxiety."

The frown was not relaxed, though he affected a tone of indifference as he replied—"As to Mrs. Wilson's sympathy, I cannot say that I consider it of much importance; but if you think she is likely in any way to delay the intelligence I am so impatient to receive, I desire that you will yourself undertake to remedy her negligence. Go quietly into the dressing-room, if you please, and keep watch there in order to let me instantly know if any change takes place."

"I will, sir," replied the meek and fully satisfied house-keeper; and, with a quicker step than usual, left the room.

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Before night, Mr. Wentworth had the almost unhopcd-for satisfaction of hearing that he was the father of a son; who,

notwithstanding the smallness inevitable from his precocious birth, appeared strong and likely to live.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

THE happy termination of such an hour of peril can hardly fail of acting upon all the hearts interested in it, in a manner as salutary as agreeable. Bad humours of all kind seem, for the time, merged and swallowed up in the full rush of joy that follows it; and no one who had watched Mr. Wentworth's look and manner as he bent over his young wife, and gazed on the little creature that slept beside her, would have easily believed the truth of the tale we have been telling. Nor were the delightful emotions experienced at that most joyful moment the only fruits of his unexpected happiness. He embraced Mrs. Worthington as cordially as if she had been as elegant and well dressed as his own mother; and even, in the full restlessness of his exceeding joy, volunteered to be himself the bearer of the glorious news to Mrs. Norris. In a word, his heart was too full of content for any harsher feeling to find room there; and he became, for the time, as amiable a man as the sanguine fancy of the Worthingtons had ever painted him.

The effect of this upon the health and spirits of his wife was most salutary, and she felt it was as natural as delightful; for the new and unspeakably sweet emotions that throbbed in her own young bosom were quite sufficient to account for the change, and, as she fondly hoped, to insure its continuance for ever.

"Ah, Marmaduke!" thought she, as she returned his looks of love, "you never knew till now how happy it was in my power to make you."

Happy, indeed, he was, and happy was every individual of the group that was permitted, in a few days, to assemble round her bed. Her father was requested to give the high-sounding name of Marmaduke to the diminutive heir, and the consciousness that there was now a third Marmaduke Wentworth to inherit his lands, and to talk of his grandfather without having the fear of Miss Christina before his eyes, so mollified every remaining asperity within him, that he actually said to Miss Lucy, on her observing the astonishing likeness between the child and its father,—

"Pray tell your sister, Miss Lucy, that if she would like to look at the baby, we shall be very glad to see her here."

The happy Isabella heard these words, and felt that his recovered kindness could go no further.

Most thankful was the delighted young mother for being thus permitted to share her felicity with those most dear to her; and thankful was she also in remembering that no one but herself would ever know the threat that had so grievously frightened her. Margaret was now her daily visitor, and not unfrequently Mr. Wentworth ushered her himself into the boudoir, that was now converted into a nursery—happy, as it seemed, to seize on any excuse for making a visit to it himself.

It was after one of these friendly *entrées* that Isabella, while rejoicing in the contrast between the present and the past, suddenly recollected that the letter which had so fearfully alarmed her for the future prospects of that dear sister might still be within the reach of every eye. She knew not what had become of it; all she remembered was, that she had read it, and no more.

The next time, therefore, that she found herself alone with Wilson, she said, changing colour as she recalled the circumstance, "Do you remember my receiving a letter, Wilson, the day I was taken ill?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied the maid, with something very like a shudder.

"Do you know what became of it?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered the girl drily.

"Has anybody seen it, Wilson?" pursued Isabella, anxiously.

"Nobody but my master, ma'am," was the reply.

Isabella's pale cheeks were suffused with a painful blush, as she said, "Did he take it?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then let me have it, if you please."

"Dear me! ma'am; what good is there in your troubling yourself about any such thing just yet?" replied Wilson, without moving a step in order to obey the command.

"I must have it, Mary," said the mistress earnestly and peremptorily. "If you know where it is, bring it to me immediately."

On this the maid departed without further remonstrance, and opening a drawer in the next room, drew thence a packet, sealed and addressed, "For Mrs. Wentworth," which she put into the hands of her mistress, and then, with equal delicacy and good sense, left her to dispose of it in private.

Wilson hoped, perhaps, that the "hateful paper," as in her heart she called it, might be committed to the flames as soon as she left the room; but it was not so. After the nervous uncertainty of a moment, Isabella broke the seal of the envelope, and read within, "To be preserved with my former letters."

These words, which had been written by Mr. Wentworth, in the dressing-room, after he had watched the tears that gave signal of his wife's having recovered from insensibility, were now read by her with a pang which they were certainly not intended to cause. It was not that she thought he would still wish that cruel letter preserved—she felt quite sure he would not; but it carried a conviction that seemed cold and sharp as steel to her heart, that the change in her husband's temper, upon which she rested all her hopes of future happiness, proceeded less from relenting tenderness towards her, than from the pleasure inspired by his new-born babe.

"Am I then so selfish?" thought she, as she dashed away the tears which this reflection produced. "What better cause could have wrought this change in him, than the sweet affection created by the sight of his child? Let it but last, and I will not challenge its source!" Then folding the envelope again over its inclosure, she took the longest walk she had yet ventured upon, in order to deposit the packet amidst the others, which, with gentle obedience, she had preserved in a drawer set apart for the purpose. The glance she gave into that drawer, as she dropped it in, was like what a shipwrecked mariner might bestow upon the rocks and shoals that had destroyed his hopes. She trembled and turned pale. But as she tottered back to her seat, the nurse entered with her baby, and her tranquillity returned as she pressed it to her heart, and felt anew how much she owed to it.

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By degrees the recovery of Isabella was fully established; and by degrees, too, it became pretty clearly evident that Mr. Wentworth intended they should return to their former mode of life; varied, indeed, by the new interest and occupation furnished by the babe, but without the constant intercourse with her family which had contributed to make the last few weeks so delightful to her.

"Your mother and sister have been excessively kind, my dear love,—nothing could be greater than their attention during the whole time of your confinement. But we must not be so unreasonable as to wish all this to continue; both your father and Mr. Norris would have cause to complain of us if we did."

This speech was addressed to Isabella on the second day of her appearance in the drawing-room, and just after Mrs. Worthington and Margaret had concluded a morning visit, made from the house of the latter, who was enjoying the dear delight of having her mother to pass a long day with her.

To any one *quite* a stranger to Mr. Wentworth, there might have appeared nothing in these words to justify alarm; but they

made Isabella change colour, and falter as she attempted to reply. He understood not, indeed, a single word she said ; for her head was bent over the infant which lay sleeping on her bosom ; but for some reason or other, Mr. Wentworth asked not for any explanation, and changed the subject by inquiring when she thought she might venture upon an airing.

"Mamma says—" she began, but checked herself ; and before she could remodel her intended reply, her husband rejoined, "I suppose Richmond will be here presently, and I think we must consult him about it."

Mr. Richmond arrived ; and after a sufficient number of important inquiries respecting every symptom manifested both in mother and child since his last visit, exactly twenty-four hours before, he pronounced judgment in favour of an airing for both on the morrow, provided the weather was *quite* fine and *quite* warm.

This is always a welcome announcement to a convalescent, and Isabella had for the last week been looking forward to it with great delight, in the hope that no objection would be made to her making the parsonage at Abbot's Preston the limit of her first drive. Colonel Seaton had not yet seen her child, and she longed for the pleasure of seeing him smile upon it. She more than half reproached herself for remembering with satisfaction that, as the nurse and child were to go with her, Mr. Wentworth could not ; but this obvious fact gave her courage when the carriage drove round, on the following morning, to say,—

"I think we will drive to Abbot's Preston, Marmaduke. I so long to show my little boy to uncle David !"

"You are a very young mother, my dear love, as this thoughtless proposal but too plainly shows," replied Mr. Wentworth. "An airing, Isabella, is a very different thing from making visits. Your getting in and out of the carriage with the child is quite out of the question. I have ordered my horse, and shall have the pleasure of attending you. I think we will drive through Steepbank Lane, and round by the Hazel Copse Road ; this is by far the most sheltered drive we have, and therefore the safest."

This cautious *projet du voyage*, however, by no means comprehended all the attention bestowed by Mr. Wentworth upon his lady and heir on this occasion. Before he mounted his horse, he placed himself in the carriage with a lamp, carefully closing all the windows, and remained there till persuaded that the air was sufficiently cured of its natural freshness to be quite safe. He then returned to the drawing-room where the nursery party awaited him ; and having watchfully superintended the envelopment of the baby in a mantle, a cloak, a shawl, and a

veil, and placed Isabella's fur cloak upon her shoulders, he gave the word for their march towards the carriage, taking great care when they had entered it, that every window should be drawn up. He then told the coachman to drive very gently, and they set off.

Having watched for a minute or two to ascertain how her delicate little treasure bore the movement of the carriage, and seeing him drop fast asleep, Isabella began to wonder how it was that she experienced so little feeling of enjoyment from the "opening paradise," which Gray so beautifully describes as being produced by every object in nature for those who have just left a sick-chamber.

"Is it not very close, nurse?" said she; "see what a dew there is upon the windows. Do you not think we had better let in a little air?"

"Why, I do think, ma'am, that a *very* little could do us no harm," replied the fat *chef* of the nursery establishment, wiping her face.

Thus encouraged, Isabella ventured to let down the glass which was farthest from the baby about half-way, and certainly for a moment did enjoy "the air, the sky," but not longer; for Mr. Wentworth, who had trotted on a few yards in advance of them, turned back to reconnoitre, and perceiving what had happened, called furiously to the coachman to stop. "Are you mad, Mrs. Wentworth!" he exclaimed, loud enough to be heard through the closed window, for the moment the carriage stopped he contrived to close this dangerous inlet to the atmosphere. "Did I not tell you to keep the windows shut? Drive home, Richard!"

"Dear me!" said the nurse, somewhat provoked at the interference; "how careful master is over his son, to be sure! But it's all one for that; he had better by half leave the child to those who understand it, and so you had better tell him, ma'am. I don't approve stifling a baby up this way at all."

Isabella said nothing, though she was much comforted to find that the relief she had for a moment allowed herself, was not deemed dangerous to the little thing so much dearer to her than life, by such unimpeachable authority.

On arriving at home, however, she found her husband's view of the case widely different. He was standing on the steps of the portico, and her first glance at him convinced her he was very angry. "Take the child to the nursery," he said, "and be careful that the room be warm enough to prevent the chill it must have received from producing any lasting ill consequence. Come into the library, Mrs. Wentworth, for a moment, if you

please." He held the door open for her to pass in, and then closing it, addressed her with great solemnity.

"I had hoped, Isabella," he said, "that the incessant tenderness with which I have watched you during your confinement would have prevented everything like the necessity of remonstrance on my part for the future. I had hoped that you would have learned that first duty of woman, a gentle and undeviating compliance with the wishes and the will of your husband. Were I indifferent towards you, were I careless, unobservant, or neglectful, there might be some shadow of excuse; but what shall we say of a woman who, having been treated as you have been, can still exhibit such obstinacy of will as to oppose and positively disobey the commands of a husband so devoted as myself? What can we say of her, Isabella, but that not even good principles, the existence of which I will not permit myself to doubt,—not even good principles have strength enough to counteract the fatal infirmity of temper!"

"What is it I have done, Marmaduke? Surely you do not allude to my having opened the carriage window for a moment, do you?" said Isabella, half smiling.

"Not allude to it! You think, madam, that I do not allude to it! Grant me patience, Heaven! This is too much! You mock me. You sneer at my tenderness, and then tell me that you know not to what I allude!"

Isabella, who was far from having fully recovered her strength, turned very pale at this burst of violence; but he saw it not, for he was, as was usual with him under all such paroxysms, striding up and down the room, with his hands clasped, and his eyes fixed upon the ceiling. She scarcely felt equal to attempting an explanation; but her kind heart, well remembering all the devotion with which he now reproached her, longed to set all right again; and rising to meet him as he paced the room towards her, she laid her hand upon his arm, exclaiming, "Stay, dearest Marmaduke! Sit down and listen to me. The heat was very oppressive."

"The heat!" he cried, with increasing violence; but suddenly looking in her face, he perceived her paleness, and stopped, for it was now his turn to be frightened. "Sit down, Isabella!" he said, "and for your child's sake do not permit your temper to destroy your health. No perversity can enable you to attribute any motive to me but excessive tenderness to yourself and the child. Can this offend you; or cause you thus to turn so deadly pale?"

"Offend me! surely not Marmaduke. I only wish you to understand that the nurse, as well as I, thought the air of the carriage too warm."

"Then she must go, Isabella. What can her feelings be towards the child compared to mine? Do you suppose for an instant that I shall suffer my will to be opposed by a hireling, who is probably profoundly ignorant, and most assuredly can care but little either for you or your boy! But let us cut this matter short at once, my love," he added, recovering his tranquillity while he promulgated his will. "She may continue to wash and dress the child, and so forth, and you, my love, may continue to nurse him as long as you appear to preserve your health, and, I must add, your temper, Isabella. Mr. Richmond seems to think it desirable for both of you; but, observe, beyond this I admit of no interference whatever in the management of my son. That he is dear to you, who are his mother, no one can doubt; that as *your* child he may be dear also to every member of your family, I am quite willing to believe; but that in either the one or the other case his importance can be the same as it is to me, I utterly deny. He is my heir, Isabella, as well as my son; and though concerning the latter tie you may assuredly be well able to judge, of the former neither you nor your relations can know anything. It is equally just and natural, therefore, that my judgment should be deferred to on every point wherein his welfare is concerned. Remember, my love, I now speak once for all, nor will I permit myself for a moment to doubt your implicit attention to what I have said. Remember, also, that should I be unhappy enough to perceive any renewed symptoms of ill-temper on your part, I shall consider myself, as in duty bound, to consult the welfare of Marmaduke, and to provide him with a wet-nurse immediately. That rapidly returning colour, Isabella, looks, I am sorry to say it, exceedingly like the emotion of anger. But I will for this time overlook it. Kiss me, my love, and now follow your little boy upstairs; perhaps he may want you."

Gladly did the melancholy disappointed Isabella accept this dismissal; gladly would she have returned to the sick-bed she had so lately quitted, could she thereby have escaped the conviction that the short bright interval of hope that had gleamed upon her path, was departed and gone for ever, leaving the gloom even darker than before. She felt the growing tyranny close round her, and doubted not that every succeeding day would tighten the chain. But utterly helpless, as she knew herself to be, and incapable in any way of weakening the galling but paltry links of which it was formed, the threat of giving a foster-mother to her boy roused something within her, which, if it could not be called resistance, was at least opposition. And then it was that, for the first time, her frank and generous nature conceived the possibility of feigning. "I must seem gay," thought



she, as with trembling limbs and throbbing heart she mounted the stairs. "It will be very difficult, but it must be done. O my boy! my boy!" she murmured, as she bent over him in performance of the mother's dearest office, "what will become of me if he gives thee over to another?"—and then, while making the most steadfast resolutions to seem happy and contented, let come what would, the tears flowed unrestrained upon the face of her unconscious treasure.

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Mr. Wentworth's assertion that he meant to assume the entire management of his son, was not uttered in any temporary movement of ill-humour, but contained his grave and very deliberate purpose. In this case, as in every other, the workings of a diseased temper vitiated feelings which without it would have been excellent. Never did the emotions consequent upon the birth of a first-born come more strongly upon a human heart than they did on his. All former subjects of interest seemed to lose their importance, and his child, his son, his little Marma-duce—and if last, perhaps not least among the fond epithets bestowed on him—his HEIR, became the loadstone of his existence. Had a good-tempered man felt thus, it would have led to a hundred amiable sympathies with those around him. His wife would not only have appeared important as a wet nurse; but would have become incalculably dearer than before, both as the source and sharer of his joy. With him, however, joy, if it came at all, came solitary, selfish, and with no genial flow of human kindness to bear it freely to the hearts of others. Where a good-tempered man would have looked for sympathy, he found cause of jealousy. It was offensive to him to believe that any should claim a right to love and value the boy, as he loved and valued him; and while he hovered round the cradle, and watched the slumbers of this new portion of himself, his feelings towards all who ventured to approach, were wonderfully like those of a sulky female bear, while performing the same office to the shaggy portraits of her own grim self.

All Isabella's reasonings, on which, during the tranquil days of her confinement, she had built her hopes of future happiness, fell to the ground. That strong inevitable rush of grateful love, with which almost every man greets the mother of his first-born, seemed to her of a better, or, at any rate, of a more lasting quality, than it proved to be; and all the amenity displayed to the females of her family vanished like a morning mist as soon the danger was over, and the vanity of hearing himself congratulated as the father of a son and heir was fully gratified.

The christening of the invaluable infant now occupied him entirely; and, to say the truth, the arrangements respecting it

were not without difficulty. Next to himself, his mother was the person most proper to decide as to the style of this important ceremony; and many astonishingly long letters were written to her on the subject. One great object was the obtaining the promise of lawn sleeves for the performance of the rites—another to secure noble and titled sponsors. Both these blessings were secured, and nothing remained but to fix the day, when a short postscript to one of the dowager's letters, though very much in conformity with his own feelings, caused Mr. Wentworth some further trouble. The postscript contained these words—

“Of course, you will remember that the inviting the whole bevy of your rustic relations would be fatal to everything like the assumption of good style in the eyes of your noble sponsors.”

Truth incontrovertible flashed on the mind of Mr. Wentworth, as he read these words. Yet even he, strong as he was in unchecked temper and unquestioning self-will, felt that it would be disagreeable to tell his wife that from the christening of her first-born, her mother, father, and sister must be excluded. Not for a moment, indeed, after receiving this maternal hint, did he persevere in the idea of inviting them; the only question was how best to proclaim the awkward fact that it was impossible.

The process of governing every member of one's family by the simple machinery of his single will, is so easy, that to those long accustomed to it, every accident tending to impede its operation becomes intolerably irksome; and before Mr. Wentworth had bestowed ten minutes' consideration on the manner in which he should speak on this subject to his wife, he had worked himself into a state of resentment against her, and all the other parties concerned, which would probably have led to great suffering had not the very excess of his irritation produced a remedy, by suggesting that if the ceremony were deferred till after Easter, it might be performed in town.

To announce to Isabella that the christening was to take place in London, involved nothing that was disagreeable, and was therefore performed within an hour after receiving his mother's letter.

“I have decided, my dear, that Marmaduke shall not be christened till we go to London. Your father, you know, was so obliging as to baptize him; and therefore the delay will be of no consequence.”

Isabella was somewhat startled at this sudden and entire change of measures; for if a mother could have wearied at listening to details of which her child is the hero, such must have been her fate under the reiterated, lengthened, and pompous descriptions of what his intentions were respecting the festivities among his poor neighbours on this glorious occasion. Her speaking

features probably expressed some symptoms of surprise ; for Mr. Wentworth looked at her sternly ; and then, placing his hand before his eyes, he said, " Let me not witness on your countenance, Isabella, the expression of feelings I so greatly deplore should exist within the bosom of my wife. Sourness, discontent, opposition ; alas ! alas ! would that it were otherwise ! "

" It is otherwise, Marmaduke," she replied, with something like affected animation ; " to see my boy christened in London, will, to me, be as great a jubilee as if it were to be performed here ; and his being, as you say, baptized, the delay signifies nothing."

Mr. Wentworth ventured again to look at her ; but remarked as he did so, that she was right to struggle with her temper, adding, " It was impossible I could mistake the first expression of your countenance, Isabella. I am never deceived in that ; but let it pass. I pardon your unspoken opposition, though I lament it."

As he said this, he stretched forth his hand towards her in token of forgiveness, and she received it with a smile ; for the hated vision of the threatened wet-nurse haunted her ; and on this occasion, as on many others since its suggestion, the words of Hamlet might have been quoted upon her with slight variation :—

" *One may smile, and smile, and be—a wretch !*"

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

DURING the whole period which intervened between Isabella's first melancholy airing, and the removal of the family to London, which took place immediately after Easter, Mr. Wentworth continued to occupy himself by unceasing interference with all the details of the nursery ; and that, too, in a manner exceedingly well calculated to wear out the patience of any mother and nurse in the world, but he had found means to sustain the endurance of both ; for the little Marmaduke's principal attendant had been hired at enormous wages, under the idea that whatever is dearest is best ; and had he insisted upon her making the child's bed in the oven, or substituting eternal potations of magnesia for its mother's milk, she would not have risked her place by remonstrating. While the mother herself, from the fear of forfeiting a privilege that seemed dearer to her than life, received each new caprice with obedient smiles, and permitted

herself unresistingly to degenerate into something not greatly unlike a well-oiled machine.

It was undoubtedly in consequence of this undeviating system of submission, that Mr. Wentworth, upon the insidious Oldfield's pointing out some circumstance that she thought particularly likely to displease him, replied,—

"It is very true, Oldfield. I see as plainly as you do, that the present Mrs. Wentworth will never equal my mother, either in dignity of deportment, or the skill with which she arranged every part of the domestic establishment; and I regret it deeply. Nevertheless, your present mistress has many good qualities, which make it my duty, Oldfield, to overlook, as much as possible, all that is amiss."

The vexed old woman curtsied herself from his presence, without uttering another word; but she snapped her fingers at him, after she had safely closed the library-door, and muttered, as she crossed the hall,—

"I know ye, I trow, don't I? You have beat your spaniel till you have taught her to lick your feet while you are about it; and so you wont be easily brought to part with her. That's it, is it?"

Before she slept, the housekeeper despatched the following epistle to her old mistress:—

"HONOURED MADAM,

"It is by no means my wish to deceive you, and I would rather make up my mind at once to remain as a menial servant till I die, or, as you once said, to starve upon my pitiful annuity, than labour to perform what I believe to be impossible. For some time after you left us, I had good hope of seeing the end you wished for obtained—solely by means of the tears shed by the lady in question; for I really thought she would either fret herself to death,—chiefly, I suspect, because my master could not endure the sight of her sister, the curate's wife, and a few other little ways he certainly had of plaguing her; or else, that he would grow sick of her,—seeing that her beauty visibly disappeared from day to day. Then came the child—and a poor, little, miserable, premature thing it is, ma'am; but its arrival turned everything upside down, and mother, father, sister, aunt, all came and went just as they liked, without leave asked or word said. I knew this would not last; no more it did. I lived in a family once, where the birth of the first child set the Methodistical father dancing; and in another, where the coming of a male child, that had been long waited for, caused a miser of a master to feast all the poor of the parish. But the first took to groaning again at the sound of a fiddle; and the last made us all pay for the feasting by living upon tripe for a month. I knew that, as soon as my mistress got about again, he would take to his old ways, and so he did; and, I must say, he tormented her as incessantly as heart could wish, till I began to think he must soon get tired of it himself, and be looking about for something new. But things seem now to have taken altogether a new turn. We have no more tears, no more faintings-away, no more loss of appetite; and the new butler, who is a very different man from the last, and seems intelligent and able to understand a hint, tells me that at table his mistress seems very little better than a fool; for, let his master be as gloomy or as sulky as he will—and that, you know, ma'am, is saying something—he never speaks to her that she does not smile and seem quite pleased. So it is plain to me, that, with all her country innocence, she is as artful as she was poor; and, what with this, and her nasty quiet way with me, that stops all speaking, either good or bad, I feel more wish than ever to do your bidding; for if you,

ma'am, were to come back to the place, it would be ten times what it is now. There's no consequence kept up, that's the fact, ma'am, and the family must go out of repute in the county, if things go on as they are. I am to be left in charge here when they go to London, my master tells me; and I've no objection. I believe he thinks I am the best person to prevent anybody fancying they may take liberties with the house and gardens; and, perhaps, I am. And when they are in London, you will be near at hand yourself, ma'am, to see what can be done with such a wonderful good-natured lady as ours. For my share, I give the matter up; unless, in case you still fix your heart upon their living apart, you should make no objection to my following a scheme of my own, worth a thousand—begging your pardon, ma'am,—of your experiments to make him get tired of her.

“I remain, honoured madam,

“Your obedient humble servant to command,

“ELIZABETH OLDFIELD.”

This letter, though written some days before the departure of the family, was not trusted to the post, but confided to the care of the new butler; and, in course of time, duly delivered to the honoured lady to whom it was addressed.

The departure of Isabella on her first visit to the capital, though attended with all the pomp and circumstance of large fortune and great pretension, was an event that, to her feelings, brought anything rather than ideas of happiness, or even pleasure. It is true that she was leaving behind her a source of infinite pain, in the daily recurrence of abortive wishes for the presence of those who were very near, yet totally beyond her reach. But in losing this pain, she lost also the knowledge that she *was* near to all those who loved her, and the hope, which at her age so long survives disappointment, that something, though she knew not what, might yet arise to lead to what she wished. As to all that London was to show her on the other hand, she looked not towards it with the slightest interest. With youth, beauty, wealth, and station, with a fancy ready to kindle into rapture at the sight of whatever was new and beautiful—with intellect, taste, and naturally with a fund of animal spirits to boot—Isabella stepped into her elegant travelling-carriage with a heart as heavy as lead; and only by such an effort as fear can enable us to make, restrained the tears that her very soul seemed to shed, as she remembered the visions of “a journey to town,” with which her mother and sister used to amuse her in the golden days that preceded her unhappy marriage.

And why was this marriage so fatally unhappy? Why was all joy for ever a stranger to her heart? Why was peace unknown to her? *Solely because her husband was an ill-tempered man.* “The very head and front of *his* offending had this extent; no more.” And this was enough, and ever will be found so, to blight and wither all the gifts of nature and of fortune.

The journey was without accident or great fatigue, being divided into two days on account of the infant. A large elegantly-

furnished house had been secured for them in Portland Place ; and as sundry servants preceded them, Isabella, had her heart been at rest, would have commenced her first London campaign with as little trouble as most people. But it might have been better for her, perhaps, had she been less exempt from all personal exertion. There is an idle vacuity in the first hours passed in a new residence under such circumstances, by no means favourable to the subduing of melancholy thoughts. She fondled her baby till he fell asleep on the morning which followed their arrival ; and then, as Mr. Wentworth had left her immediately after breakfast to wait upon his mother, she found herself with rather more leisure than was desirable for taking a review of her own situation. What are all the sermons that ever were preached on the worthlessness of riches, from Peter the Hermit to the field ranter of yesterday, compared, as to force of argument, with the musings of Isabella during these solitary hours ? Three splendid drawing-rooms stretched their rich draperies around her. Mirrors and *or-molu* glittered in her eyes. Satin and lace enveloped her fair form ; and, had she touched the silken cord that hung beside her, a liveried lackey of some six feet high would have appeared to do her bidding, as obsequiously as if a magic lamp or ring had summoned him. Yet would she not ten thousand times have better liked the humble dwelling of her sister, could she have shared it with a partner permitting her to breathe the air of heaven in peace ? None can doubt it who have ever watched the influence of an ill-tempered husband upon every hour of his wife's existence—and those who have not, had better rest in their doubts, if they happen to be young ladies, than take any experimental means of removing them.

Isabella's first visit was to her mother-in-law. Mrs. Wentworth resided in a moderately sized mansion in Curzon Street ; but it was fitted up and furnished with such perfection of elegance, and a finish so delicate in every detail, that her daughter-in-law felt the entrance of her nurse and child into the drawing-room to be an almost unwarrantable liberty. Mr. Wentworth, however, who accompanied her, had very different thoughts in his head. With a lofty grace that might have become the ceremony of presenting a royal hope to its grandam, he took the diminutive creature in his arms, and laid it in the lap of his mother.

Isabella, not having the same advantages as the reader to assist her development of the dowager's feelings, was quite at a loss how to understand the smile with which she received the precious deposit. It was not a tender smile, such as she herself bestowed upon it ; nor a proud smile, like that her husband was accustomed to accord ; but there was something both of triumph

and mockery in it, which Mrs. Oldfield would have comprehended at once.

The pale thin face of the still lovely, though greatly changed Isabella, was contemplated much in the same style; so that the dowager's reception of the party appeared on the whole rather gay than otherwise.

"My maid may look at your son and heir, I presume, Marmaduke?" said the dowager, ringing the bell, as soon as she had satisfied herself that the poor little thing intended to perpetuate the honourable name of Wentworth was the smallest child ever born alive; "She will be quite delighted, I am sure. Show nurse to the housekeeper's room," she added, addressing the servant who answered her summons; "and if Watkins is not there, let her be sent for."

Mr. Wentworth looked very much as if he thought that Marmaduke the third was dismissed with too little ceremony; but, suspecting his mother might not approve the fat nurse's being seated upon one of her satin chairs—even though it was covered, he only said,—“The housekeeper's room is not underground, I hope?”

“Yes, it is, sir,” replied the footman.

“Then if you please, mother, Mrs. Watkins must pay my son a visit in his own apartments. Order my carriage to draw up, sir, if you please;” and taking the baby in his own arms, he descended the stairs, followed by the nurse, whom he ordered to get into the coach, and then placed her charge safely on her knees.

“You are really become a most exemplary father, Marmaduke,” said his mother, greeting his return to the drawing-room with another smile. “Your fashionable friends will hardly know you in your new character.”

Mr. Wentworth winced a little, as he ever did when any word convertible into a jest was addressed to him, but he replied without any great appearance of displeasure,—

“It will be a matter of great indifference to me, ma'am, what any of my young-men acquaintance may say or think of me. Such of them as are happy enough to have property as large as mine, will understand when an heir is born to them, that it is an event very little connected with jesting.”

“I have no doubt of it,” said his mother; then changing the subject she expressed her hope that they approved the house she had taken for them.

“Perfectly,” replied Mr. Wentworth, very naturally deeming his own opinion of the most importance; “I like the house extremely; the nursery apartments are excellently well arranged, and the air from the Regent's Park must I think, be as

pure and healthy as that of my own place. Should we, however, have reason to think it otherwise, I shall leave town directly. There can be no parliamentary business of sufficient importance to be put in competition with Marmaduke's health."

Mrs. Wentworth, senior, raised the embroidered cambric which she held in her hand, to her mouth, and a minute elapsed before she spoke again.

"What think you of the drive down Regent Street, Mrs. Wentworth?" said she, addressing Isabella; "young country ladies are generally in ecstasies at the shops and the large window-panes."

Isabella was conscious that during the drive she had thought only of the chance there might be of a certain frown which something—God knows what—had called to her husband's brow being chased by his mother's presence, or increasing till it burst in a storm before her. She answered, however, with as little prevarication as she could, saying that everything appeared to her extremely splendid.

"Do you mean to go out much, Marmaduke? Shall you have an opera box?"

"Good God! mother; what can have led a woman of your fine understanding to conceive such an idea? Are you not aware that Mrs. Wentworth nurses her baby?" replied her son.

"And the opera, you think, would interfere with this? Well, then, I must look about for another partner. I meant to propose that we should take a pit box between us."

"With the greatest pleasure, ma'am," replied Mr. Wentworth, with polite eagerness. "I have not the slightest objection to that. The opera is very nearly the only place where one can decently show oneself in London, and I rejoice to find that we shall profit by it together."

The smile which this speech called to the dowager's handsome face, was of a very different quality from those which preceded it, for it expressed sincere and very cordial approbation. She began to think that she should not very much care whether her elegant son and his fast-fading wife continued to live together or not. "If he puts her aside in this effectual manner," thought she, "what matters it whether she be in the house or out of it? Her blighted baby will never reach the ripe age of six months; and if the feeble mother does not soon follow it, I'll never trust a sunken eye again."

Cheered to the very centre of her heart by this mental soliloquy, Mrs. Wentworth gaily answered her son's civility by saying that she left the business wholly in his hands, convinced that, whatever box he fixed upon, she should be well contented to pay half its rent. Then, continuing in the same lively strain,



she said, "And the christening, Marmaduke? I have most ably performed my part in that business. When shall you fix the day?"

"As soon as I know that all those whose presence I desire are in town," he replied.

"Then send forth your invitations directly. All the world is in town, I assure you; and parties will begin immediately; so that, if you are anxious to secure people, you have no time to lose."

"What do you say to it, Isabella?" said her husband, turning towards her with more civility than his mother thought at all necessary. "Do you feel well enough to preside at a large dinner-party, and perhaps a ball afterwards?"

"I hardly think I do," replied Isabella, with the practised but not skilful smile without which she now rarely ventured to speak; "but, should I prove unequal to it, Mrs. Wentworth would supply my place too well for me to be greatly missed."

There was not the shadow of pique or ill-humour in the look, the voice, or the feelings of poor Isabella as she said this; nevertheless, the dowager affected not to conceal her displeasure at it. She looked openly towards her son, shook her head, and shrugged her shoulders.

"This looks very like a paltry jealousy, I must confess," said Mr. Wentworth, answering the silent appeal. "It is lamentable, Isabella, to see you give way thus to feelings of which you ought to be ashamed! Is this the style of conduct by which you hope to propitiate the favour of my mother? You know that there is nothing in the world I have so much at heart as that she may be led to forget, and from her heart forgive, the disadvantageous connection which my devoted attachment to you has induced me to form. And do you think this is the way to achieve it?"

Isabella knew, with terrible certainty, that he was now in full career towards a violent fit of passion, which would to a certainty end in "a paper," and perhaps in the execution of his ever-remembered threat. To smile now could be of no avail—save to provoke him further; to weep she dared not, even if the terror that seemed to supersede all grief had not dried the source of tears; neither did she dare to speak, well knowing, from experience, that whatever she should say would inevitably be construed into further offence; and thus harassed, puzzled, frightened, she presented a spectacle that he well might be ashamed to look upon. But this shame, if he felt it, was not calculated to smoothe the angry brow that frowned upon her. If not ashamed, he was assuredly vexed that his mother should witness the irritation that he could not control; and, hearing

the sound of carriage-wheels immediately below the window, he looked down upon the carriage, and rejoiced to find that it was his own.

"The carriage is come back, Mrs. Wentworth," he said, in a subdued voice; "it will be better not to distress my mother's feelings any longer."

Isabella instantly rose; and, approaching her mother-in-law, who preserved a dignified silence, she said, in a voice still sweet, though it trembled,—

"If I have said anything offensive, dearest madam, forgive it, I beseech you, and let my youth and ignorance plead for me."

"Pray, say no more about it, Mrs. Wentworth," was the reply; "I have no wish, I assure you, to intrude myself into your place." Then, slightly touching with her fingers' ends the little hand that was held out to her, she turned away, and, addressing her son, said, in a half whisper, "Is it absolutely necessary that you should go too, Marmaduke? I really wish you could give me a quiet half hour."

"Certainly, ma'am," he replied, with much seeming readiness; though, beyond doubt, he would have much preferred accompanying his wife, in order to give her the advantage of a little further gentle remonstrance; this was, however, for the moment impossible. The bell rang, the carriage was ordered to draw up, and, with a polite observance upon which he did not fail to compliment himself, he handed the silent Isabella into it.

It is hardly necessary to accompany her in her drive home, in order to be certain that she did not enjoy the fine shops and great panes much more now than before. In truth, her solitude was at this moment hardly a relief to her, so busily did it permit her fancy to occupy itself in sketching the probable results of what had passed.

Not only old but oftentimes young experience, also

"Will attain  
To something like prophetic strain;"

and the experience of Isabella, though of no long standing, was not unpractised.

## CHAPTER XXV

YES!—all Isabella's prognostics proved true. A "paper" reached her while dressing for dinner, interspersed with hints relative to the probability of the child's suffering in consequence of her giving way to such paroxysms of jealous sullenness as she had displayed in Curzon Street: but all this was followed by forgiveness when they met at dinner; once again she was told to kiss him, and once again she placed her cold reluctant lips on the forehead of the man whom ten short months before she had worshipped as a demigod. She was, however, inexpressibly relieved by finding that he did not again touch upon the project of making a hireling usurp her sacred office near her child, and she began to hope that the threat was as unmeaning as the accusations by which it had been accompanied. This idea gave her courage to bear everything else with real fortitude and apparent cheerfulness; and, by the help of it, she weathered many a terrible scene relative to the child's christening. Whatever went wrong—and things will go wrong, even where there is so much power to make them go right as lay in the coffers of Mr. Wentworth—she suffered for it. He did not, indeed, reproach her, if "my lord this," or "my lady that" excused themselves from being present at the ceremony; but the petulance raised by such mishaps put him in a state of mind that permitted no look, word, or action to pass without some annoying comment. If these were but lightly though incessantly uttered, or had they any shadow of cause to excuse them, they passed over like the ceaseless grinding of a careful gardener's roller upon his gravel-walks!—but whenever he began the torturing work by something ludicrously unreasonable, it seemed as if some jeering imp within twitted him with its absurdity; for it was ever the scenes which began thus that ended with the greatest violence, and, instead of resembling the creaking and creaking operation alluded to above, became more like the process of stoning an unresisting martyr to death than anything else.

A life like that now led by Isabella, varied only by the circumstance of a "paper" following or not following the ceaseless succession of such fits of ill-temper as have been already described, must not be followed too much at length, lest weariness of spirits should overpower the pity of the reader, and the re-

cording pages serve rather as a warning against an unweighed volume than an unweighed choice of a companion for life.

Willingly, though of necessity, did Isabella abstain from all large parties after the important christening was over; for such was the counsel given by the dowager, and such the law established by her son. Many women who have for years been made miserable by the temper of a husband, and more men who have smarted equally, perhaps, from that of a wife, will at last learn to suffer from the evil influence only when its cause is near at hand, making their lives resemble a chess-board, the black squares representing the hours when their vowed partner is present with them, and the white ones those when he is not. But Isabella was far from having arrived at this state; something like a feeling of relief certainly followed the exit of her fretful, irritable, fault-inventing spouse; but no mixture of enjoyment beyond the temporary intermission of pain cheered her existence: she mourned over her own blighted and almost dead affections, and shrunk from the chill cold image of her altered self which self-examination showed her. She had grown artful too; she knew it, and she went to think of it.

There was, too, another source of sorrow, produced even by those who would have gladly mixed their own peaceful hours with suffering, could they thereby have saved her from a single pang. The letters of her mother and of Margaret almost broke her heart. They knew that Mr. Wentworth deemed himself authorized to read every letter addressed to his wife, and this knowledge seemed to freeze the very ink in their pens. Instead of the full communication, warm from the heart, that might have flowed over half a dozen pages closely written from the beginning, yet getting closer and closer as it approached the end, the only letters she received were cold bulletins in large, fair characters, stating that they all were very well, and concluding with hopes that her dear little boy grew nicely, that herself and Mr. Wentworth were not the worse for their removal to London, and that they should have the pleasure of hearing from her soon.

Could Isabella have guessed the process by which these pal-sied epistles were produced, she would at least have had the comfort of knowing that she was as dearly loved as ever. Though still far from suspecting how very sad was the life she led, they had become by degrees fully awakened to the miserable fact that she was unhappy, and that the captious temper of her elegant husband found cause of discontent in most things.

"Be very cautious, dear wife, how you write to our poor girl," said Mr. Worthington, when, a week after the departure of the Wentworth family for London, the first despatch from the par-

sonage was preparing. "Remember the hint she gave to Margaret. Mr. Wentworth reads every note and letter she receives, and he will not be very averse, I suspect, to find something to cavil at in letters from us."

"I know it, I know it!" exclaimed Mrs. Worthington; "she is lost to us in every way! You shall see my letter, Henry, and shall castigate it if you find any possible cause of offence."

The mother's letter was accordingly subjected to a most cautious scrutiny, at which Margaret assisted.

"Don't you think, mamma, that he may fancy you have been taking the forbidden freedom of walking in his grounds, if you say this about the lilacs being in such full beauty there; though I know you only saw them over our hedge?" was Mrs. Norris's first remark, and it was backed by her father.

"Most assuredly he will," said he, "and you had much better leave out all this about uncle David, and his low spirits. He has always seemed for some reason or other to dislike Colonel Seaton, and I think this would be quite sufficient to put him out of sorts. And here, too, my dear love, you must not say anything about your being always with her in heart; he will be sure to consider it as a reflection upon his having so effectually prevented your being with her in any other way."

"And look, mamma," said Margaret, "you say here that Norris is working hard to make his little flower-garden as like as possible to that of Abbot's Preston. Depend upon it, if Mr. Wentworth sees this, he will construe it into a presumptuous confidence that we expect to continue there; whereas, you know," added the curate's happy wife, with a sigh upon the only subject that ever caused her one, "you know that his promise was conditional, and then poor Isabella will have a 'paper' about it. I often wish Mary Wilson had never told me of those horrid 'papers.' I never think of my own perfect happiness without a pang at my heart for her."

"Yet she has thrice as many thousands as you have hundreds, Margaret."

"Ah, papa! I hate to think of that. I remember our all being so delighted at the splendid offer! Yet the dear girl told me again and again, when I used to question her, that she should have loved him had he been penniless."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Worthington, who was engaged in carefully reperusing her letter, "perhaps, too, I had better say nothing about her aunt Lucy's intending to work her a cover for the top of the cradle. He may very likely think it a presumption."

"Very likely," answered both her counsellors; and the letter was rewritten, and despatched, like the few others that followed

it, with more watchful affection in its composition, and less appearance of interest in its contents, than could have been united under any other circumstances.

Little, however, did the anxious council assembled to pass judgment upon these unmeaning despatches, guess the result of them.

"Here is a packet for you, Isabella," said Mr. Wentworth one morning, entering her dressing-room. "It is from your family, I presume, as it has the Taunton post-mark."

Isabella received it with no very lively demonstration of pleasure.

"Thank you, Marmaduke," she said, and laid it on the table, while she continued twiddling about the decoration of a little cap on which she was engaged.

"Do you not choose to read it? Perhaps my presence prevents you? It may be there are family secrets there, not intended to meet my eye. It is therefore you will not open it. Is it not so, Isabella?"

"No, indeed, Marmaduke!" replied his wife; "I am quite sure there is nothing that you may not see," and hastily throwing her work aside, she opened the cover and rapidly read the inclosure. It was written exactly upon the model before described; and though unable to repress a sigh at its utter want of interest, she gave it fearlessly into her husband's hands, saying,—

"It is hardly worth your reading, Marmaduke; but you will find no secrets in it."

Mr. Wentworth took the letter, which consisted only of a sheet of note-paper, and read it through. Isabella looked in his face with the innocent confidence that all was right; but to her dismay and astonishment she perceived his countenance assume its well-known hue of anger, and his brow contract into a portentous frown.

"You have probably mentioned to your family, Mrs. Wentworth, that I have heretofore expressed to you my wish for such a degree of conjugal confidence between us as might authorize my perusal of your letters. Is it not so, madam?"

"I believe so, Marmaduke," replied his trembling wife.

"You believe so? You do not know it? Gracious Heaven! that I should live to hear the voice of the woman I have so madly loved and so madly honoured, uttering words of such contemptible subterfuge! Where is the quickness and brightness of intellect, madam, upon which I heard you so frequently complimented in France? Are you quite unable to perceive that you cannot believe this fact unless the record of your own conscience has revealed it to you?"

Isabella looked at him beseechingly, but did not answer.

"I really must beg the favour, Mrs. Wentworth, of your replying to my questions with a little more distinctness. I suspect that even your reverend father, notwithstanding his jocose propensities, would inform you, if you asked the question, that when a husband interrogates—it is the duty of his wife to answer him. Have you ever told your family that I hold myself privileged to read your letters?"

"When I found that you took interest enough in these domestic letters to read them, Marmaduke, I told my sister so, adding that she must be careful of her style, for that you were a critical observer upon everything you read."

This was most literally true, and had been spoken before her marriage, in consequence of a very lover-like avowal on his part, that everything, however trifling, that could be addressed to her, would immediately become of the deepest interest to him; but this, though he probably remembered it, did not touch the point at which he was now galled, and he replied,—

"No matter, madam, how you framed your communication. You made it, and this," holding high the unfortunate letter, "this is the result."

Isabella was silent; she understood his inference, and felt its truth.

For two or three terrible minutes he remained with his angry eyes fixed upon her, and apparently expecting an answer, and then said,—

"You are right, Isabella, in remaining silent; it is not within the compass of the most wily woman's wit to invent any fable that may excuse such a paltry piece of artifice as this. They would have me believe, would they, that such is their usual and accustomed tone of confidential communication with their beloved Isabella? and they do my intellect the honour of believing that I can be gulled by it. Isabella! this is monstrous!"

What could she utter in return that would not feed the flame this ill-judged and short-sighted excess of cautiousness had raised? The truth was indeed too glaringly evident; for no parent's letter to a child at a boarding-school could have been written with more affectionate care not to get the dear one into a scrape.

"You will not even answer me?" resumed Mr. Wentworth, after another pause. "Isabella! can you believe that you are doing your duty?"

Thus forced to speak, and unable to find words sufficiently unmeaning to be perfectly safe, she desperately decided upon trying one word of truth, and replied,—

"If that letter, Marmaduke, be written with the feeling you suppose, the reason for it is obvious. They feared to displease you."

The astonishment which this plain remark produced might have proved to Isabella, had she been in a state to reason upon it, that her previous timidity and unvarying gentleness had rendered her husband incapable of enduring truth from her in any shape. Had he discovered her in the act of strangling her babe or robbing the Bank of England, he could hardly have looked more petrified with amazement. She did not, however, dare to look at him; and though her beating heart anticipated surely enough the burst of anger that followed, she lost the first demonstration of pure surprise which his countenance indicated, and which might, perhaps, have been useful to her.

Mr. Wentworth, from his very earliest infancy, had been surrounded with so much pernicious deference, and his mother, though occasionally giving way to her own vehement temper, exacted such undeviating respect from others towards him, that the moral malady of his nature had been nurtured into strength entirely surpassing his own control; and he now stood before his gentle wife, trembling from head to foot from an excess of anger for the expression of which he could find no fitting words.

"You own it, then?" at last burst from him, with a panting violence that resembled the first letting off of steam from a high-pressure engine. "You own that you have set them on their guard against me—against the man who has raised you from their station to his own! Base, base ingratitude! poor, paltry, low-bred cunning! unworthy woman! unworthy of my station, and of me! And think you, madam," he continued, changing his rapid vehement enunciation for an almost inarticulate muttering between his closed teeth, "think you that I am at any loss to guess how it would fare with my poor name, were their accursed letters safe from my perusal?"

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It would be useless to follow this most unmerited burst of indignation any further. He left her, at length, comparatively calm himself from having literally exhausted his powers of scolding, but not till he had so completely overpowered her fortitude, that Wilson found her, when she entered the room a few minutes afterwards, stretched upon the sofa in an agony of tears.

"I guessed as much," said the indignant girl, taking a bottle of salts off the table, rather from habit than from any faith in its efficacy under such circumstances. "I guessed as much from the sound of the library-door as he shut himself in. Alas! alas!



my dear, dear lady, this will never do—you are cold and pale as death! Oh, goodness! you are fainting!”

“No, I am not, Wilson—pray, pray be calm, or I must forbid your coming near me. I am very wretched, Mary Wilson,” added the unhappy wife, again bursting into tears, “I know not how to act, what to do, or what to say; O Mary! is it very wicked to wish that I were dead?”

“It would be better we were all dead than tortured and tormented every day and every hour in this way. I never see you go down stairs without feeling sick with terror at thinking what may happen before you come up again; and, God knows, he never takes a step up these stairs, that I don't tremble as if I was going to be tried for my life.” These words were spoken from an impulse of feeling too strong to be resisted; but the poor girl knew that she was not licensed to use such language; and seeing that her mistress shook her head, as having no strength to chide her, she dropped on her knees beside the sofa, and taking Isabella's hand, bathed it with her tears and covered it with her kisses.

“Forgive me, my dear lady, forgive me,” sobbed the poor girl. “My duty is to watch you breaking your heart, and say nothing.”

Exhausted, friendless, and miserable, Isabella bent forward, and leaned her head upon the shoulder of her servant; and, for a moment, both mistress and maid wept in silence. It was during this unlucky moment that Mr. Wentworth re-entered the room, under pretence of restoring the unlucky letter which he had inadvertently carried away with him; but intending at the same time, to display his greatness of mind by telling her that he had resolved for the future never to look at any of her letters, and that her relatives were at liberty to speak of him in whatever language they pleased. It is probable, however, that this resolution, though perhaps unconsciously, was but a device for opening again the subject that had so sorely galled him; and which he was perhaps the more anxious to do now, because he had invited one or two gentlemen to dinner, which must prevent his recurring to it afterwards. But what a sight did he behold! his wife almost, as it seemed, clasped to the bosom of her menial servant, and evidently in the act of communicating all her sorrows. Gracious heaven! was he to be the theme of such a confidence as this? Was he, whose refined and sensitive nature, as he called it, had ever kept him from forming a close intimacy with any one,—was he to be outraged by having all his bosom secrets intrusted to the keeping of his wife's waiting-maid?

He stood looking at them just long enough for both of them

to be aware that he was there; and then, without uttering a word, he stepped back, and shut the door after him.

"O Wilson! what will become of me now!" exclaimed the terrified Isabella, "he will think I have told you all."

"Well, ma'am, and if he does guess as much, I hope it may do him good. Pray, do not take on so, ma'am; I am sure things can't be worse than they are already, if he had overheard every word you have said to me."

"But he has not overheard what I have said to you, Wilson. If he had, he would know that though you have seen my tears, I have never repeated to you any of the words that made them flow; you know not, you cannot even guess, how very, very unfortunate it is; but it is not your fault, my poor girl—leave me now, Wilson—and tell nurse to bring the baby here. I would rather not be alone if he should return."

But Mr. Wentworth did not return. He was not, however, idle. His first care was to despatch notes to the gentlemen engaged to dine with him, declaring himself too unwell to have the power of receiving them. After this was done, he inquired if Mrs. Wentworth had yet ordered the carriage for her daily airing with the infant; and finding that it was to come round in a few minutes, he employed this time in writing the following very little "paper" to his lady:—

"Politeness obliges me to apologize to you for making use of the carriage that was ordered for your airing; but business of importance has obliged me to do it.

"M.W."

Having sealed and addressed this to Isabella, he gave orders that it should immediately be delivered to her; and, at the moment it reached her hands, she heard him drive from the door.

A few minutes brought him to the house of his mother, whom he had the good fortune to find alone. She instantly perceived that something had gone wrong with him; and, breathing an inward prayer that it might be a quarrel with his wife, she held out her hand to him with a more fond and gentle look than usual.

"My beloved son!—you do not look well;—tell me, for God's sake!—nothing the matter with your precious child, I trust?"

"No, mother, no;" he replied, with a tone of languor that was in nowise affected; for the vehemence of the passion that had assailed him, as well as the frightful energy with which he had expressed it, had much exhausted him.

"Your wife, then, Marmaduke? Has anything befallen your wife?"

"My wife? Yes, mother, it is of my wife I would speak, and temperately, reasonably, kindly, if I can. I greatly want your advice, mother. You have told me, not unfrequently, and, doubtless, you have told me true, that my temper is warm."

"It is, my dearest Marmaduke; it is warm, but generous, confiding, noble. I trust that you are not tormenting yourself with any notion that a harsh word, probably most justly called for, is to be repented of as if it were a crime. I trust it is nothing like this that makes your eyes look so sunken and your lips so pale? Such feeling would show great weakness, Marmaduke."

"Listen to me, my dear mother!" said her soothed and well-pleased son, seating himself on the sofa that was her usual place, "sit down by me here, and I will tell you all that has passed. I come to you expressly to do this, and to intreat that, if you find me wrong, or any way unreasonable in the feelings I have expressed, and, God knows, still suffer from," he added, touching his breast and his forehead, "I come to intreat that, if you think me wrong, you will tell me so."

"I will, my dear son, I will. I have chid you too often, my Marmaduke, for you to feel any unreasonable fear that I should shrink from doing so now."

"I am very thankful, my dear mother," he replied, taking her hand and kissing it, "that I am within reach of you at this moment. As yet I have done nothing, absolutely nothing. I thank God I have done nothing! nor will I, till I have your judgment upon what has passed. I need not tell you," he continued, withdrawing his eyes from her face and looking on the carpet with a very genuine feeling of having done wrong, "I need not dwell upon the love I have felt for Isabella. God knows I love her still, and shall do so to the hour of her death, if she will let me. This love led me, even before our marriage, to tell her that I desired the most perfect confidence on her part towards me, and that she could give me no proof of affection that I should so greatly value, as the permission to see any letters she might from time to time receive. She made no objection to this—none in the world; or, I assure you, I should have withdrawn the lover-like request instantly. The only opportunity she has hitherto had of receiving letters, was while we were in Paris; and with the greatest apparent frankness, she showed me long-winded epistles from every member of her family. They were written in rather a homely, gossiping style; but I dare say they were very interesting to her, for they were full of domestic anecdotes and replete with every imaginable detail concerning their feelings and her own. Now mark—this morning I received a small inclosure for her, the cover of

which bore the Taunton post-mark. I delivered it to her with my own hand, and, with the same feeling of confiding affection that had originated the wish, I asked her if she had any objection to my seeing it. She answered very freely, NONE; and safely might she say so, mother; for, when she gave it to me, I found, instead of such confidential chit-chat as I had seen before, about a dozen formal disjointed sentences, such as one of my servants might have written to another, had they been very certain that some strange accident would place the letter in their master's hand. I cannot express to you, mother, the sensation that swelled my heart as I read it. Indignation—I will say virtuous indignation—almost choked me. It was plain, evident, clear as light, that the woman I had made such immense sacrifices to raise from rustic obscurity to a rank equal to your own, had plotted with her hateful family, that no theme of the slightest interest should be touched upon in their letters, because those letters would be seen by me!”

“My poor, poor Marmaduke! I well know what that warm, confiding heart must feel!”

“But hear me, mother! You have heard nothing yet. I taxed her with it, and what think you was her answer?”

“God knows, Marmaduke; do not ask me to guess it. I must confess, if you force me to do it, that your wife is not a person with whom I ever could have sympathy. Go on, I pray you: I shall never guess.”

“No! not if you laboured at it for a thousand years. She told me, mother, that if it were so,—if my suspicions were correct, the cause was evident. They feared to anger me by saying more. If a single thought of their ungrateful hearts had reached my eyes, they knew that it would anger me!”

“Good Heaven! Is it possible? Are you sure she said this? Could she avow it to your face? Poor Marmaduke! Ask me not for advice, for I have none to give. Such cold-hearted ingratitude, joined to so daring an avowal of it, passes anything that has ever reached my mind before, and I feel as incapable of giving an opinion of what you ought to do, as a baby.”

“I would to God, mother, that you had heard all!” he replied, with a return of vehemence that threatened to render what he was about to say unintelligible. “Let me finish before you speak again, and tell me not, when you have heard the end, that you cannot advise; you must advise, mother! You shall advise; it is your bounden duty, nor will I let you shrink from it.”

“Compose yourself, for Heaven's sake,” she replied. “Gracious God! to what a state has she reduced you! Why, Marmaduke,

you tremble like a woman! Fear not, my dearest, my only son, fear not that I should refuse you the succour of all the judgment that this hateful tale shall leave. O Marmaduke! I would die to help you."

These words were not spoken without a long and touching application of cambric to the lady's eyes, and her son was touched accordingly, changing the ringing tone of passion with which he had last spoken, to one greatly more gentle.

"Forgive me, beloved mother!" he said, "God knows, I ought not to speak thus to you; but I have suffered greatly. You know not how my temples throb at this moment; I feel as if I had a smithy in my head. Believe me, I am greatly to be pitied. I know what my feelings for Isabella have been and still are. I know that I deserve her love and gratitude; yet it is plain, as is the sun in heaven, that I have neither!"

Mrs. Wentworth was about to interrupt him again at this point, by a reiterated expression of her sympathy, but he laid his hand upon her arm in token that she was to listen, and proceeded,—

"After this inconceivable avowal, I left the room; but finding, on recovering in some degree from the shock I had received, that I had brought the hateful letter away with me, I again entered her dressing-room to restore it, and to tell her, at the same time, that, for the future, her relations might abuse me as much as she and they approved; for that I would never again look at any letter addressed to her. She has yet, however, to learn this resolution, for the spectacle that met my eyes on entering, rendered speech as impossible as if I had been struck with palsy. My wife was seated on the sofa, and at her feet knelt Wilson, that *innocent* country girl whom you long ago warned me was no proper attendant for her. The servant's arms were fondly thrown around her mistress, the head of Isabella rested on her shoulder; and as both looked up upon my entrance, I perceived the visage of each copiously bedewed with tears. Now speak, mother! Now tell me what is the line of conduct most fitting to pursue?"

"Marmaduke!" said the dowager solemnly, "you put no easy task upon me. As to the audacious serving wench, indeed, the question is not difficult. She must not be permitted to sleep another night in your house; but for her mistress, Marmaduke!—but for her worthless mistress! What can I say? What can I propose that should give you any chance of recovering your lost happiness, but—*separation*!"

This final word was uttered almost too low to be heard, and, after staring in his mother's face for a moment, Mr. Wentworth ejaculated,—

"What?"

"Nay, ask me not to repeat it, my dear son. I love you too entirely to endure with patience such a history as you have now related, and any counsel I should give you now, would come too little from the head, and too fresh and directly from the heart."

"Separation!" He then repeated slowly, and with the air of one inexpressibly shocked. "Did you say 'separation,' mother?"

"Perhaps; I know not. For God's sake do not press me thus, Marmaduke! My heart is bleeding, is broken, I believe;" and again the cambric was applied to her eyes. "But if there be a remedy, it is you, not I, must find it."

"Separation, mother?" he again repeated. "I must have expressed myself too strongly—I meant nothing of that dreadful nature—I only ——"

"Say no more on the hateful subject, Marmaduke, I pray you to say no more; you forget that I am your mother; you forget how galling to my very soul it must be to hear what you have now recited. You think that you feel strongly, but you cannot feel as I do. Let us quit the subject; I am willing to allow that your only course now, is to endure. I suppose we agree upon the necessity of immediately dismissing that insidious girl; and let this end the discussion."

"Assuredly. On that point I feel your advice to be excellent, and shall follow it implicitly," replied Mr. Wentworth, glad, as it should seem by the cheerful alacrity with which he spoke, to quit a subject on which he perceived he might be pushed farther than he intended to go; for to say truth, the idea of separating from his lovely, unoffending wife was about as far from his thoughts now, as in the hour he married her. However, he remembered his mother's well-known violence of temper, and after a moment's consideration, ceased to feel greatly surprised that it should have thus shown itself; the provocation being, as he confessed to himself, so very great.

"I will leave you now, my dear mother," he said, rising, "comforted and consoled, as I always have been under every annoyance, by your warm affection. Wilson shall be dismissed forthwith, and let us hope that her mischievous influence removed, my erring Isabella may learn to return my generous affection more worthily."

A smile, somewhat approaching to a sneer, was the only reply to this; but the dowager rose, offered her cheek to the lips of her son, pressed his hand upon her heart, uttered a tender "God bless you!" and so dismissed him.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

THE human heart is a very complicated machine; and it is sometimes not quite easy to avoid an appearance of contradiction in attempting to explain its movements. It is doubtful if any circumstance or event short of Isabella's death could have gone so far towards effacing from the memory of her husband the offence she had given, as hearing from his mother the single word "SEPARATION." Not that it in the slightest degree acted upon his reasoning powers, by awakening any consciousness of the injustice with which he had treated her; on the contrary, had he been obliged to state the affair over again, he would probably have done it with a still stronger emphasis on the generous affection he had ever felt for her; but there was a feeling of renewed and quickened love set in action, such as a child might feel if a once valued but then neglected toy had been suddenly taken from him. So selfish a man as Mr. Wentworth can hardly be said to love anything; but Isabella was really of more value to him than any other of his possessions except his son, and the notion of losing her was one exceedingly well calculated to soften whatever anger rested upon his mind against her. He had not been two minutes in his carriage before he began to regret having put off his invited guests; for he felt the forgiveness he purposed to extend, though of course a happy and most welcome termination to the scene that had so recently passed between them, would hardly suffice to remove the little awkwardness that might follow his insisting upon the immediate dismissal of her favourite maid. He resolved, therefore, that as soon as this necessary piece of business was performed he would write a line to his mother, stating how implicitly he had followed her advice, and offering the company of himself and wife for the evening.

On arriving at home, therefore, his first care was to order Mrs. Wilson's attendance in his study. The girl appeared with traces of weeping still visible upon her cheeks, and with an aspect in which he fancied that he saw more impertinent displeasure than humble repentance.

"I have sent for you, Wilson," he began, "to give you notice that you can no longer continue in my family; the sort of familiarity that you have thought proper to assume towards your

mistress, and which I fortunately discovered this morning, renders it quite impossible that I should any longer permit your services. If you have any friends in town, I wish you to leave the house immediately. If not, in consideration of your youth and ignorance, I will allow you to remain till to-morrow morning; but remember I insist upon it, whether you go immediately, or remain by my kind consideration till to-morrow, in either case remember that you are not again to see your mistress."

"Not see my mistress, sir!" exclaimed poor Wilson, in great agitation. "If you keep to that, sir, I must think it will be very cruel indeed."

"Your opinion, Mistress Wilson, will not, I should imagine, be of any very great importance," replied her haughty master.

"I do not know anybody in the world out of this house," sobbed Wilson; "and if you turn me into the streets, sir, before I get a place taken, what will become of me?"

"I have already told you, young woman, that you may remain here till to-morrow. I will order a place to Taunton to be secured for you. Remember my commands, and now leave the room."

"I beg pardon, sir," cried the poor girl, in a very deferential accent; "I hope I know my duty to my master, but I owe a duty to my mistress also, and if she commands my attendance, I cannot refuse it, sir."

Such a frown as the humble Mary Wilson had never been honoured with before, and which her uncomplaining mistress had certainly never described, was for a moment the only reply she received. During that moment Mr. Wentworth rang the bell, and on its being answered, gave orders that the carriage should come round again instantly.

When the servant had retired, he again deigned to turn his indignant eyes upon the weeping abigail, and said, "If, when you return to your native village, you are asked how it happened that you lost your place so suddenly, you may reply that your extreme impertinence rendered your dismissal necessary."

Wilson made no answer, but, with streaming eyes and a heavy heart, turned to obey his commands and leave the room. "Stay!" he ejaculated, in a tone that made her start; "you have made me understand that it is necessary you should be watched while you remain in the house;" and then, after a moment's reflection, he again rang the bell.

"Send Denham to me," was the command that followed; and Denham, the woman who now performed the part of house-keeper, appeared. Leading her to the window, he whispered a few words, which being received with a very intelligent look and a courtesy, she left the room.



He then placed himself at his writing-desk, and wrote the following brief epistle to his mother :—

"I send you a prisoner, dear mother. The girl, Wilson, has behaved most audaciously, and insists, or something very like it, upon seeing her mistress before she leaves the house. This I will not permit. Have the kindness to let one of your people take a place for her in the Taunton coach for this evening, if possible, and if not, for to-morrow. Her packages shall be sent after her; and will you, also, have the kindness, dear mother, to accept my company this evening?—you know how I abominate every club to which I belong; and I cannot say I have any inclination for a *tête-à-tête* with Isabella. I doubt not she will consider the dismissal of this insolent girl as an act of great cruelty, and I have suffered too much already this morning to contemplate with composure the idea of any further provocation.

"Ever your dutiful son,

"M. W."

When this was written and sealed, Mr. Wentworth took up a review that lay near him, and appeared to read.

"May I leave the room now, sir?" said Wilson, with a little impatience, perhaps, in the tone of her voice.

"No, young woman, you may not," was the reply, and again he applied himself to the book. In about a quarter of an hour the housekeeper returned, bonneted and shawled herself, and bearing in her hand a bonnet and shawl for the banished Wilson. She brought, also, the wages due to the poor girl, who received the money without by any means distinctly knowing what it was for, nor what was to happen to her next.

"The carriage is at the door, sir," said Mrs. Denham, placing the bonnet on the head and the shawl on the shoulders of Wilson.

"Then go," replied her master; "give this note to my mother with your own hands, and bring me her answer. Go!"

The woman opened the door and made a sign to Wilson that she should precede her; but the girl, instead of obeying, turned once more towards her master, and with a countenance in which indignation was now more legible than sorrow, she said, "I beg you to tell me, sir, in the presence of my fellow-servant, what crime I have committed to cause my being thus sent off at a moment's warning, without being permitted to see my mistress."

"I send you from my house, young woman," replied Mr. Wentworth, "because your conduct has been such as to render your remaining in it disagreeable to me. I have taken every care for your safe conveyance to the place from whence we took you; and now, instantly follow my housekeeper to the carriage, or the police shall be called in to assist in removing you."

Poor Mary was very young, and very ignorant of the world and its ways, or she might perhaps have sought rather than shrunk from the exposure which the interference of the police might have occasioned but, as it was, the idea of being turned

out by violence frightened her effectually, and without another word she suffered herself to be led to the carriage by Mrs. Denham, and driven off, she knew not whither.

While this scene lasted, Mr. Wentworth felt no infirmity of purpose whatever; his own will, indeed, was generally sufficiently strong to guard him from such weakness; but, had it been otherwise, the degree of opposition that Wilson had manifested was fully enough to have screwed his courage to a bolder deed than merely sending a good and innocent girl from her service; for, without being stained by a single vicious propensity, there were but few things which *contradiction* might not have driven him to do. As soon, however, as the unequal contest was over, or, at any rate, after the expiration of the few comfortable minutes that followed it, he began to remember that Isabella must be made acquainted with the summary mode by which he had thought fit to manifest his disapprobation of the friendly understanding he had reason to believe existed between her and her maid.

He balanced some time between a "paper" and an interview, and at last decided in favour of the latter, partly because he felt disposed to hasten the forgiveness and reconciliation he intended to extend to her; and partly because he could not for an instant doubt the infallible efficacy of the *kiss* which would follow in soothing and healing whatever feeling of displeasure the dismissal of her maid, or, indeed, any other offence, might leave.

With an erect mien, therefore, and with a countenance that he intended should express gentle authority, he mounted to his lady's apartment; and, after slightly tapping at the door, entered the dressing-room.

Isabella was sitting beside the sofa on which her baby lay asleep. She had dismissed his nurse, and was contemplating, with an aching heart, the sharp outline of the little arm that lay upon his mantle. Ever since their arrival in London, she had been tormented with the fear that he did not thrive as he ought to do; and, as she now marked his diminutive size, and looked also at her own almost transparent hands, and felt the heavy languor which seemed to hang like a chain about her, the miserable idea occurred that perhaps her want of health caused that of her child, and that by selfishly indulging her maternal feelings, she might be endangering his precious life. It mattered little to the result of this sad meditation whether the malady she suspected in herself arose from misery, from constitutional weakness, or from those faults of temper which she was now so accustomed to hear attributed to her that she began to fancy they must exist. In either case, it was her duty to propose the remedy at the idea of which she had lately trem-

bled ;—and she trembled at it still. But there was something within her that seemed to say, “No child can prosper that draws its means of life from me.”

These thoughts occupied her mind so completely, that when Mr. Wentworth entered, she had almost forgotten the angry mood in which he had left her, and, with a sort of desperate resolution, determined at once to enter upon the subject that occupied her thoughts.

It was, however, never very easy for any person to speak when it was Mr. Wentworth’s purpose to do so: not, indeed, that he was at all a voluble speaker, or disposed to indulge in too frequent an exposition of the feelings or thoughts that occupied him, but, upon most occasions, what he wished to do, that he did.

It therefore happened, that when Isabella raised her large languid eyes upon him as he entered, and said,—

“Is it you, Marmaduke? I wished to speak to you——”

“I wish to speak to you, my love,” was the reply.

To yield under such circumstances was a matter of course, and Isabella put herself in act to hear.

“I really hope, my love,” said Mr. Wentworth, “that what I am going to say will not vex you—I trust you will not *permit* it to vex you; but I have felt myself under the necessity of dismissing your maid.”

“My maid? What maid, Marmaduke? Not Wilson? It is not Wilson, is it, Mr. Wentworth?”

“It certainly is Wilson, my love, and no other,” replied her husband. “She is, without exception, the most presuming, insolent servant that ever entered a house; and to permit the continuance of her attendance upon you is quite out of the question.”

“I am very sorry!” said Isabella, clasping her hands, and fixing her eyes upon the ground, in hopes to hide her starting tears,—“I am very, very sorry.”

“It does you no honour, Mrs. Wentworth. You might know, I think, if you were disposed to do me justice, that she would not have been sent away if she had not richly deserved it; and, in that case, such sorrow is not very creditable.”

“Let me speak to her, Marmaduke, may I? I am sure I shall make her see that it is her duty to apologize, if she has said anything to offend you. She is an excellent girl! Indeed, indeed, I should be very loath to part with her. Let me see her directly, and I know she will beg your pardon most sincerely.”

“She may, very probably, sincerely wish for my pardon, Isabella; but it by no means follows that I could very sincerely promise to accord it. All this is mere trifling, however, for she is already gone.”

"Gone?—impossible! You cannot mean it, Mr. Wentworth; you cannot mean that Mary Wilson has been turned out of doors without my knowing it?"

"Do you mean to tell me that I lie, madam?" replied her husband, his composure suddenly giving way, and perhaps feeling that any further effort to control himself would at this moment be injurious to the future demeanour of his wife. "Am I accustomed to say one thing and to mean another? No more of this, if you please. Take care that you wear not out the affection that I feel for you. Your insolent servant sets off for Taunton to-night or to-morrow morning, and in the mean time my mother's house is her little-deserved shelter. Thus, you see, I have not, though deeply displeased, forgotten what I consider to be my duty. Never mention the subject again; remember I make a point of this, for the recollection of that girl's impertinence will ever be disagreeable to me. In full assurance that you will never so far forget what you owe me, Isabella, as to express further regret on this subject, I am willing to forgive what has passed. Now kiss me, my love, for I am writing to my steward, and must return to the book-room."

Isabella felt a quick but feeble pulsation at her heart, a sickness that made her long to lie down and sleep to wake no more; and, in a word, such a general consciousness of failing strength, and of all the sensations that constitute health, that her purpose, far from being lost sight of in the vexation which had just been inflicted, was greatly strengthened by it, giving her courage to turn her head for the first time from the proffered caress, while she said,—

"Wait a moment, Mr. Wentworth; I must speak to you."

Somewhat startled by her manner, which was altogether different from what was usual to her, he said, gently enough,—

"What is the matter, Isabella? You look ill, my love."

"I do not think I am well," she replied, striving to speak with something like composure; "but it is not of that, it is not about myself that I wish to talk to you. I am uneasy, very uneasy, Marmaduke, about our boy. Do you not see how thin he is?" she continued, directing her husband's attention to the baby, and drawing aside the mantle that enveloped him.

"He is a seven months' child, Isabella," replied Mr. Wentworth. But his voice trembled, and he gazed on his treasure with a look of alarm that spoke plainly enough the feeling her words had inspired.

"I know it, Marmaduke, I know it," she replied, "and herein lies all my hope; but it does not satisfy me; and I have lately thought," she continued, with a faltering voice, "that you were perhaps right when you said that I made a bad nurse for him."

Now, as Mr. Wentworth never had really thought for an instant that the blooming, animated, radiant creature he had married could be otherwise than the very best nurse in the world for the child she had borne him, he became greatly comforted at hearing her say this; and, concluding that nothing had put so sad a fancy in her head but the natural importance which she attached to every word he spoke, his countenance assumed an expression of perfect satisfaction which it but rarely wore, as he replied,—

“Pooh! pooh! Isabella. I spoke not of your bodily health, my love. You never were a cherry-cheeked damsel, you know; if you had, you would never have been my wife, I promise you; so do not fancy you are out of health because you are somewhat paler and thinner than nurse Tomkins. Darling boy! See, he opens his beautiful eyes! How bright they are! Depend upon it, Isabella, that though you and I are rather ignorant in these matters, my mother would have found out in an instant if anything particular had ailed him.”

“But Mrs. Wentworth very rarely sees him, Marmaduke; I do not think she is fond of children.”

“Not of children in general, perhaps; but if anything ailed a child of mine, Isabella, trust me she would discover it soon enough. Compose your spirits, my dear love. Depend upon it, you have taken a very idle notion into your head; but I shall see my mother this evening, and will talk to her about it.”

While they were still conversing, Mrs. Denham returned from her mission, and, having ascertained where her master was to be found, mounted to the dressing-room, and presented to him the following note from his mother:—

“I shall be delighted to see you this evening, my dearest son. All your wishes shall be attended to, and obeyed as laws, by

“Your devoted mother,

“M. A. W.”

Having perused this, Mr. Wentworth looked at his watch, and then prepared to leave his lady with a tender kiss, saying, “How this morning has slipped away, my love! You have a bare half hour for dressing. Shall I ring the bell, for you to summon nurse?”

“If you please,” said Isabella, trying to rouse herself from the oppression that seemed to weigh upon her; “are there not some gentlemen coming to dine here to-day?”

“No, dear, no,” replied Mr. Wentworth, with some trifling feeling of embarrassment, “not to-day. You must let Denham dress you, I think, till you have supplied yourself with a new abigail,” and as he pronounced these last words, he disappeared.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

MR. WENTWORTH found his mother surrounded by a small but brilliant *coterie* of some dozen favoured individuals, most of whom were already known to him, but there was one lady who arrived with her son a few minutes after he entered the room, to whom he was presented as to a person whose acquaintance would afford him great pleasure. Of this Honourable Mrs. Nutcomb and her accomplished son, he had of late often heard his mother speak with enthusiasm, and received the cordial advances of both with less shyness and more benignity than he usually showed in greeting strangers.

"Lionel has been longing for this introduction ever since we returned from the Continent," said the lady, "and has positively hurried me up from Bath a full week before I intended to leave it, because we learned from my dear friend here that you were in town."

All this was confirmed by the dear friend herself (who, by the way, had only made this intimate acquaintance about twelve months before, during a six weeks' visit to Cheltenham), and by the gentleman himself, who declared that from his Paris friend, Madame de Dorville, he had heard so much of his distinguished countryman as to decide him upon taking the very earliest opportunity of making his acquaintance.

This statement had more truth in it than is usually found in vehement professions. Mr. Lionel Nutcomb had passed several seasons at Paris, sometimes with his mother, and sometimes without her. Their last visit there was made just after Mr. Wentworth and his bride left it, and not only the fascinating Mrs. Clifton Dorville, herself, but several of her friends, did talk much of the rich; stiff, proud Englishman, who had just been showing off his wife and his wealth wherever he could find an opportunity of exhibiting either, and at the same time displaying from time to time such singular specimens both of vanity and shyness, that he was, as the Countess de B—— observed, "*un échantillon superbe de bizarrerie Britannique.*" Every one declared, however, that his wife was the most beautiful creature ever seen, and that he was so lavishly liberal in expenditure of all kinds, that it was impossible not to consider him, notwithstanding his singularities, as a most agreeable acquaintance.

Now if there ever were a lady deserving the epithet of a *chevalière d'industrie*, the Honourable Mrs. Nutcomb was she. With a very limited income, and a very unlimited taste for expense, this lady had, like Mrs. Wentworth, been left a widow at a very early age, with an only son. Both mothers had strenuously laboured to do their duty, by setting their respective sons in the way they respectively wished them to go; Mrs. Wentworth striving to make her son fully sensible of the value of all the worldly advantages he possessed, and Mrs. Nutcomb impressing on the mind of hers the necessity of acquiring all he did not.

The tie between the two former was strong, but that between the two latter stronger still; and they had now, the handsome Lionel having reached the mature age of thirty-three, been for many years carrying on a sort of partnership together, of so very confidential a kind, and in which their interests were so indissolubly blended, that no mother and son upon the face of the earth ever presented to the admiring eyes of sentimental philosophers a more perfect example of filial and maternal union.

They had entered upon their vocation under circumstances peculiarly favourable. Mrs. Nutcomb was tall, slight, pale, and quiet-looking—in short, had as little the air of a lady who lived by her wits as possible. She had, too, the great advantage of being lawfully privileged to have her cards printed with “*the honourable*” before her name, being the widow of the sixth son of an Irish viscount; and this advantage, always considerable where the individual is distinguished by the ill-matched peculiarities of being poor and proud, is greatly more so, when the name it precedes has pretty nearly an equal right to prefix “*the infamous*” before it.

Mr. Lionel Nutcomb was scarcely less fortunate; for, in the first place, he was the son of his mother, and, in the next, was handsome, easy, and agreeable; cautious by nature, but gay by assumption; a ready and exact calculator of chances, and withal, the most audacious, yet, apparently, the least presuming man in existence.

The partnership was carried on by a continuous system of high play, varied with wonderful ingenuity, both as to place and manner of proceeding. Sometimes the “industrious creatures” were boarding, for three guineas a week, at Cheltenham, always for the health of the old lady, while her son indulged himself with a little whist at the rooms, and now and then, perhaps, in a quiet rubber in his mother's private apartment, to pass away the time which his filial feelings obliged him to devote to the invalid. Sometimes, with pinions newly fledged, they betook themselves to Paris, when they were established in a showy *troisième*, in

some fashionable quarter, gave ices, and high play *à volonté*, (but generally late enough to have shown themselves at a fashionable *soirée* or two, before their own doors were opened), put a pair of horses and a pair of liveried servants to their carriage bearing the viscount's arms, during about two hours, for three days in every week; went to court, and dressed irreproachably. Occasionally they might be seen at Baden Baden, or even heard of at St. Petersburg. About one season in three they ventured upon London, and various little intervals were profitably filled up, when pains in the limbs took the old lady to Bath, or symptoms of general debility to Brighton.

To be very particularly intimate with the mother of an idle young man, possessed (beyond all question) of at least ten thousand a-year, was an advantage well worth some trouble to obtain. When it is highly important to the interest of an individual, that he should acquire an accurate estimate of character from the exterior manners and appearance, it is remarkable how capable many become of attaining it. The Honourable Mrs. Nutcomb was an adept in this study, and had not encountered the dowager Mrs. Wentworth three times, before she ascertained that her vanity, both personal and maternal, was so egregious, that to wound it would incur enmity which should know no bounds; while to soothe it might insure a degree of liking that could easily be turned to profit. She discovered, too, that Mrs. Wentworth was violent-tempered, worldly-minded, and with as little principle of any kind as might suffice for current use in society. She was, therefore, a most desirable acquaintance in every way; easy to dupe, as the vain ever are, and therefore not difficult to please; profitable from her ostentation, liberal in her standard of morals, and, which was infinitely more important than all the rest, the Honourable Mrs. Nutcomb was left with little doubt on her mind, that Mrs. Wentworth's son was greatly guided by her as to his acquaintance and manner of living.

At this first meeting, the intimacy so greatly desired by the Nutcomb partnership advanced considerably further than they could have reasonably hoped. Mrs. Wentworth, in the most amiable state of spirits from the domestic events in her son's family, seemed determined that, in this case, her son should leap all preliminary ceremony, and at once enjoy the privileges of friendship with "the delightful Nutcombs." She hinted that he was not in good spirits, and that nothing would do him so much good as a little intimate society. Mrs. Wentworth, junior, was not in very good health, was a nurse, and did not receive much company, and therefore, that her own object was, as much as possible, to draw him from home.

"Is it possible that that beautiful young woman, of whom we



used to hear so much at Paris, has fallen into ill health?" said Mrs. Nutcomb, with an air of friendly anxiety.

"She is not well, I think," replied the dowager, not affecting to speak with more interest than she felt; "and the truth is, the marriage is by no means a happy one. Her temper is essentially bad; and though she is beautiful, she has no other attraction. Of obscure family, and perfectly uneducated, there is nothing in her to render a *tête-à-tête* agreeable."

All this was muttered between the two ladies on a confidential sofa in the second drawing-room, while the gentlemen were enjoying a game of chess in the other.

The degree of estimation in which the beautiful daughter-in-law was held, it was not difficult to discover, and that sort of petting demeanour was assumed towards Mr. Wentworth, which is often practised towards rich and handsome young men who are thought not to be happy at home.

Mr. Wentworth was a good chess-player, and extremely fond of the game; Mr. Nutcomb was a superb player, but did not care a farthing about it; greatly preferring billiards, and wisely considering *écarté* at a tolerable stake as a much more rational occupation for a man of talent. However, he lost three games that evening, declaring, notwithstanding his inferior skill, that it had been the greatest treat he had enjoyed for months, as Mr. Wentworth had exactly that degree of superiority which made looking at every move an improvement.

"They are beginning, I hear, to play for money at all the clubs," observed Mr. Nutcomb.

"Are they? I think that is a pity," replied Mr. Wentworth.

"I should say so too," replied the other, "were it not that most men, without some such object, will *not* take the trouble of studying the game as you and I have done. I have found it for years a horrid nuisance to sit down with my very heart and soul in the game, to play against a fellow who does not care a straw about it. Now a stake cures this at once; and you, who are such a glorious player, will find prodigious advantage in it. People will be better able to play up to you a few years hence, you may depend upon it; and it's worth while to let fashion have its way to obtain this. You have rarely found yourself equalled, I suspect, Mr. Wentworth?"

"Not very often," replied Mr. Wentworth, smiling, and at the same moment giving his adversary check-mate. This was indeed very true, as he had rarely played since he left college, excepting with one old gentleman residing near Oak Park, who was decidedly his inferior.

Mr. Wentworth confessed to his mother when he took his leave, that he had certainly found her friends even more agree-

able than her description had led him to expect, and that he hoped in some way or other to meet them often.

Notwithstanding the amusement which had so agreeably occupied him, Mr. Wentworth found time to speak to his mother on the subject of his little boy. She listened to him with a feeling at her heart as nearly as possible the exact contrast of that which appeared on her face. Not indeed that the notion of the child's probable death was new to her. Rarely as she had seen it, she had marked its various symptoms of defective strength with sufficient accuracy to be pretty confident what the result would be; but, nevertheless, it was a satisfaction to find these symptoms had made sufficient progress to strike less experienced eyes than her own. To see that child die, and its fading mother follow it, leaving her magnificent-looking, ill-matched Marmaduke once more free to graft a noble scion on his rich but plebeian stock, was the first wish of her heart, and some demon whispered to her, that it should not be vain. But even as this whisper seemed to reach her soul, she promised, with a look full of kindness, to call and see her grandchild on the following day.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE dowager kept her promise, and at a friendly, familiar hour on the following morning was announced even in the dressing-room of her daughter-in-law. Isabella was alone; a book was in her hand, but her eyes wandered from it, and there was nothing in her countenance to induce the belief that she had found interest in its pages. In truth, she was at that moment thinking upon poor Wilson, and of the effect her unlooked-for return was likely to produce at Abbot's Preston. Was it likely that those who loved her should longer remain in any degree ignorant of her real situation? She had too often betrayed her feelings to her maid, though she had never descanted much upon them, to render it probable that so constant a looker-on could be in any degree deceived; and as she thought of the deep, lasting, hopeless sorrow that her idea would now bring, she felt as if her marriage had been a crime, and she herself guilty of producing all their suffering.

Mrs. Wentworth, on entering, perceived the fixed sadness of her countenance; she perceived, too, the faded, sickly hue of her complexion, and the extreme attenuation of her hands; and it is not too much to say that the heart of Lady Macbeth was not more unnaturally indurated when she exclaimed, "Give me the daggers!" than was that of this cruel worldling, when she read

the probable renewal of all her most fondly-cherished hopes, in the gradual extinction of health, strength, and life in the innocent Isabella.

To pretend not to perceive that she was suffering, which was her general system, would to-day have been too obviously affected; Mrs. Wentworth therefore immediately entered upon the subject of her visit by saying,—

“Come, come, my dear, you must not sit with your finger in your eye, because your baby does not recover the accident of his premature birth immediately. I assure you, Mrs. Wentworth, it is mere ignorance and folly to expect this. Let me see the child. I am not, as perhaps you have found out, very fond of nursing; but I am as well informed as most women of my age respecting the symptoms of most infantile complaints. My son was an extremely delicate infant, but you see he is not the worse for it. Let me see the little Marmaduke.”

The nursery-bell was rung, and the poor little baby appeared. The fact that it was decidedly fallen away since she had last seen it, was quite sufficient to satisfy the grandmother. “If this were the only obstacle to my wishes,” she mentally exclaimed, “I had never a better chance of being mother to an earl’s daughter than at this moment.”

She took the child in her arms, and affected to examine its limbs and the temperature of its skin with great attention. “I do not see anything greatly the matter here, nurse,” she said, appealing to the portly personage who received forty pounds a-year for carrying the light burthen about. “My opinion is, that the child wants nothing but country air. The sea would be the best thing in the world for him; don’t you think so?”

Nurse Palmer was not one of those who say “No” to a great lady when they do not agree with her, and consequently replied, “Undoubtedly, ma’am—that is exactly my opinion.”

“Then why did you not tell me so before, nurse?” cried Isabella, in a voice that spoke displeasure; “you have never hinted such an idea to me.”

“I have lived too long in the best families, ma’am, not to know my place better. It was not for me to propose your breaking up your season in London, ma’am, and packing off to the sea, just upon my judgment. Besides, ma’am, there’s no time lost at all; the sea would do quite as much good now as ever it would.”

“Do you not think, ma’am,” said Isabella, with her mournful eyes fixed upon the infant, and trembling all over as she awaited the answer—“do you not think that a stout, healthy wet-nurse might be of service to him?”

“If you ask my opinion, Mrs. Wentworth, with any idea of following it, you will not again think of so dangerous a scheme.

I should be sorry to see the child put into medical hands here, because I know the system, and that he would, according to custom, be physicked to death; it is always the way when a stranger gets hold of a baby—they know nothing about his constitution, and physic, physic, physic, is the only way of proving their zeal and attention. But, nevertheless, if you won't believe me, you had better send for a medical man—our family physician is not at all a child's doctor, or I would propose sending for him; but send for whom you will, I am quite sure he will tell you that nothing is so dangerous as changing the wet-nurse of a delicate child."

Terrified at the idea of a competitor in the nursery, where, whether for a short time or a long one, she greatly preferred reigning alone, the fat nurse corroborated this opinion with all the force of professional phraseology, which, even had it been put in force contrary to her wishes, would effectually have convinced the timid young mother; but agreeing as it did with all she most wished to believe, was listened to with implicit faith, and she determined never again to torture herself by proposing what it would render her miserable to see accepted. The dowager was not aware, perhaps, how little any further argument was necessary to settle the question in the manner she wished, or she might not have added—"I should be sorry to think you were tired of the office, Mrs. Wentworth; but even if unfortunately this be the case, I trust your sense of duty will induce you to persevere where the doing so is of such great importance."

"Tired!" said Isabella, but uttered not another word on the subject, which she was glad enough to believe was settled for ever. Then, struggling to conquer the feeling which made all consultation with her haughty mother-in-law a painful task, she referred to what had been said about the sea. "I will mention your opinion to Mr. Wentworth immediately," said Isabella; "it will, I know, have great weight with him; and if you and he shall think it desirable, I could be ready to leave town to-morrow."

"Well, well, that's all very right on your part—but I suspect there is no necessity for such wonderfully great haste. Where is my son?—in his book-room?"

"I believe so, ma'am," replied Isabella.

"Then I will speak to him myself on the subject. Pray keep up your spirits, Mrs. Wentworth; it can do no good, you know, to take up fancies about the child from mere ignorance—I dare say he will do as well as hundreds of others under the same circumstances. Good morning."

And so the visit to Isabella ended.

As the dowager descended the two flights of lofty stairs which

led to the book-room, she stepped slowly ; for she wanted leisure to meditate a little upon the manner in which this sea-scheme could be arranged most advantageously for her interests.

Not even tacitly to herself, not even to her own heart, had Mrs. Wentworth yet confessed that she actually calculated upon the miserable pampered temper of her son as a means of destroying his wife. She repeated so often to herself, to her maid, and to half a score of particular friends, that dear Marmaduke's wife was a poor, delicate thing, who, in her opinion, was not likely to live—that she at last persuaded herself that the girl was decidedly consumptive when he married her—that her infant doubtless inherited the malady, and that the sooner they were both dead the better, because dear Marmaduke would be of a fitter age to form another attachment. Such was her general view of the subject, upon which it is certain she bestowed very many thoughts ; and she had become so sanguine in her hopes since Isabella's arrival in town, that the idea of making the young couple separate had already lost much of its value. Whenever she thought Isabella looked better, it revived ; but the seeing her as she had done that morning, made her feel that any effort to obtain it must be so much trouble lost. Should she then, at the very moment that she was most anxious to awaken a taste for fashionable associations in the mind of her proud, shy son, advise his withdrawing himself to the country with his wife and her nursery ? The idea was detestable—and yet—a strange undefined sort of fear arose in her mind. Isabella was certainly declining—was certainly not likely to live ; but she was very young, and might not the cheering breeze from the sea, if enjoyed in perfect tranquillity, restore her ? She had suggested this scheme to get rid of her—but now she bitterly repented having done so.

As the idea of this restoration crossed her mind, she laid a faltering hand on the balusters, and stood for a moment perfectly still, and literally lost in thought. “ He shall decide for himself,” at length she murmured ; “ but if he goes, the Nutcombs shall go too.”

“ Well, mother ! What do you think of him ? ” said Mr. Wentworth, starting up as she entered. “ Philip told me you were gone upstairs. Tell me all. Do you think my darling boy is in any danger ? ”

“ No, really, Marmaduke ; I perceive nothing of the kind.”

“ Thank God ! ” exclaimed the father fervently ; “ thank God ! ” he repeated, taking his mother's hand, and pressing it gratefully to his lips. “ You were ever my best comforter ! And tell me, mother, do you think Isabella is right about having a nurse ? ”

“ Oh, dear, no ! I see no reason for it whatever,” she replied,

"and so I have told her. I believe, indeed, it was only a fancy of the moment; for it seems quite given up, and now all her wishes seem centred in going to the sea. But probably, Marmaduke, you will not like this just now. It will interfere sadly with your parliamentary business; and besides, it is hardly the season for it yet."

"Good God! mother, what does that signify?" he vehemently exclaimed. "Do you suppose that all the parliaments in the world would detain me here an instant, if my going elsewhere could by possibility benefit my boy? I think the idea excellent, and I shall give orders instantly for our removal."

"How very impetuous you are, my dearest Marmaduke!" softly exclaimed his mother; "what can you know about the effect of the sea air upon a delicate baby? I really should be afraid to try it till the season was more advanced."

"Perhaps you are right, mother," he replied anxiously; "I can know nothing. The safest way unquestionably will be for me to send to Sir —, and ask his opinion."

This was exactly what the dowager least desired, but she now manœuvred in vain; the physician was sent for, and the weakly infant displayed before him.

Sir — was a man of kind feelings; he read the young mother's agony in her earnest eyes, and said, not that he thought it quite impossible the child could live, which he would have done had no such pitying emotion checked him.

"It is a delicate little plant, indeed," he said; and turning to Isabella, added, "are you a good nurse, madam?"

"O dear yes, sir!" replied Mrs. Palmer, perceiving that her mistress faltered, and thinking it no presumption, on this occasion, to answer for her. "It is not possible there could be a better."

"That is very well, then," said the physician, "and, upon my word, I know not of anything else that can be prescribed."

"The sea has been suggested," said Mr. Wentworth, who assisted at the consultation.

"The sea has been suggested, has it?" said Sir —; "I see no objection to it, and I think it might be better for your lady than London. Of course, neither mother nor child will have anything to do with bathing. Some warm sheltered place it must be, at least, till the end of June. The Isle of Wight, I should think, would be as good as any. Shanklin, for instance: there are some pretty cottages there, and it is admirably sheltered."

This was quite sufficient to decide Mr. Wentworth upon removing his family to Shanklin with as little delay as possible; but happening to know that the accommodations of the place

named were not abundant, he sent off, by that night's mail, instructions to Mrs. Oldfield to repair to that beautiful village with all speed, and to secure, and prepare for their reception, the most convenient house (or houses if necessary) that could be obtained.

During the inevitable delay that intervened before these preparations could be completed, Mr. Wentworth and Mr. Nutcomb had played themselves into as great a degree of intimacy as the cold, shy manners of the former could permit. The Honourable Mrs. Nutcomb had called upon the young Mrs. Wentworth, three dinner parties had followed at Portland Place, Curzon Street, and St. James's Place (the latter being the residence of the Nutcombs), and the old lady had made herself of extreme importance to the young one, by declaring that for many years of her life, her attention had been particularly directed to the care of a delicate child, under exactly the same circumstances as the little Marmaduke, whom, she was happy to say, was now one of the stoutest and healthiest men in existence.

By the end of a fortnight the Wentworth family were established in their beautiful, but diminutive mansion, near the top of the celebrated "Shanklin Chine," so well known to all lovers of the picturesque; and if Isabella could have been permitted peace, and freedom from perpetual *gronderies*, she would have enjoyed it. As it was, her own health certainly improved, and she fancied that her boy improved too; and not the less so, perhaps, because, within ten days after their arrival, Mr. Wentworth, having received the agreeable intelligence that his chess-playing friend, together with the exemplary and Honourable Mrs. Nutcomb, were arrived at Ryde, began to make frequent excursions to that more fashionable resort, leaving her often for many hours together, with the power of sitting upon a rock, and gazing upon the sea, without having its soothing murmur interrupted by a remonstrance upon her turning her head one way, when it would be so greatly more desirable that she should turn it another; or an assurance that if she sat a moment longer on the spot she had chosen, she would inevitably take cold; or a hint that it would be more her duty to do any earthly thing than that on which she might happen to be employed; or, worse than all, being followed by a "paper," pointing out the enormity of all she had said and done since the last time he had remonstrated with her on her manifold faults and imperfections.

But this welcome and most salutary relief did not last long; the Honourable Mrs. Nutcomb expressed such intense anxiety respecting the health of the little Marmaduke, and so many

friendly wishes to see the mother, and watch how they were both going on, that Mr. Wentworth felt himself induced—after some struggle with his natural averseness to such extreme sociability—to invite both mother and son to pass a few days with them in their retreat. A sort of supplementary cottage, taken in aid of the house, offered sufficient accommodation. The invitation was cordially accepted, a chess-table established on the very edge of the ravine, and all prospect of solitude and repose for Isabella banished.

Notwithstanding Mrs. Wentworth's failing health, and the total loss of her young bloom and bright vivacity, she was still exceedingly lovely; nor was the accomplished Mr. Lionel Nutcomb slow to perceive it. When he first saw her in London, he had looked upon her as a young woman in a deep decline, who was probably sent out of town to die; but the moment he met her on the terrace-like lawn of her pretty abode, where she stood looking down into the picturesque little ravine with that species of tranquil gratification which some minds never cease to feel from beautiful scenery, he immediately perceived that she was in much better health than when they parted, and that if her eye failed to sparkle with the laughing brightness belonging to her age, there was some reason for it besides consumption.

So acute an observer as Mr. Nutcomb was not likely to be long domesticated with his dear friend and his dear friend's beautiful wife, without forming a pretty accurate judgment as to what that reason might be.

Among the very little society into which Mr. Wentworth had permitted Isabella to enter, either in town or country, his extreme sensitiveness to external appearances had generally served as a sufficient curb upon his temper to prevent his being pointed out as a tyrant, or his wife as a victim. Wherever they went, he was only censured as abounding in pride; and she as sadly deficient in animation. But, with all the restraint and all the caution it was in his power to use, it was not possible wholly to conceal the habitual sourness, the ready irritation, the fretful complainings, that made so essential a part of his daily history. Dinner parties and evening parties, morning calls and accidental meetings innumerable, may come and go, yet still leave the parties very profoundly ignorant of the inward and spiritual dispositions of each other; but living in the same family is quite a different affair; and no husband, or wife either, can pass this ordeal without showing to observers of tolerable acuteness whether they live well together or not.

"I will trouble you not to open that window, if you please, Mrs. Wentworth," said the master of the house, in accents of the utmost politeness; upon which Isabella, who was in the act



of throwing wide the casement upon the newly opening roses, closed it again with that sort of quickness with which a school-boy obeys the voice of the pedagogue.

"Shall we walk this way?" said Isabella, turning from the little wicket-gate towards the sea, when the party were setting forth for their evening stroll. Upon which her lord and master looked at her, and immediately led the party in the opposite direction.

"At what time will you have the carriage ordered, Isabella, for our drive to the priory?" said Mr. Wentworth with the most obliging attention.

"At half-past one, if you please," she replied; "and we must get our luncheon over by that time if we can."

"Quite out of the question," was the rejoinder; not, however, addressed to her, but rather as a soliloquy uttered as he rose from the breakfast-table and rang the bell.

"Tell the coachman to be ready at half-past two," was the order that followed.

These were trifles very nearly as light as air; nevertheless, they served so well to quicken the observation of Mr. Lionel Nutcomb, that he soon convinced himself of the lovely and interesting Mrs. Wentworth being exactly in the position most likely to receive with indulgence any involuntary burst of mingled admiration and compassion which might escape him.

With the impertinent *nonchalance* of a *soi-disant* man of fashion, Mr. Nutcomb had led the ceremonious and vain Wentworth, who was equally incapable of despising the audacious *clique* to which his new friend belonged, as of resisting the cool intrepidity with which its members assumed authority to regulate all doubtful points in the conventional code of their society, not only to play chess for a considerable stake, but to bet with aristocratical indifference on boats and billiards, on the colour of a flag too distant to be seen, or the age of an elderly beauty past mark of mouth. Thus, the dinners at Shanklin cottage being excellent, and the horses freely lent to his use handsome, and of excellent paces, Mr. Lionel Nutcomb gave himself willingly up to the engrossing pleasures of friendship, while the insidious and nicely graduated flattery by which he contrived to sweeten the gall and soothe the asperity of Wentworth's temper, gave him an influence that seemed daily to increase.

Meanwhile his honourable mother exerted her well practised skill to the utmost, in order to win the affection, gratitude, and esteem of Isabella; and she had very nearly succeeded, by means of persuading her that no one living understood the maladies of seven months' children so well as herself. But this friendship was nipped in the bud in consequence of a trifling inadvertence

on the part of Mrs. Nutcomb. Isabella chanced to overhear the old lady declaring to the nurse, in confidence, that she knew no more about children than a cow did of a holiday ; but that it was plain her mistress took no pleasure in talking of anything else.

Mrs. Wentworth took no notice of having thus discovered how entirely she was indebted to the Honourable Mrs. Nutcomb's politeness for the attention she had devoted to the subject ; but, despite Isabella's meek civility to her husband's friends, the acute old lady soon perceived that she should make nothing of her ; and, during the remainder of her residence at Ryde, she permitted her son to visit at Shanklin as often as he pleased, provided he did not insist upon her accompanying him.

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All men have their weaknesses, and most men have some points of character wherein they are not weak. Mr. Wentworth was less liable than most men to the enfeebling passion of jealousy ; this might, perhaps, be partly owing to the sincere and exalted admiration which he entertained for himself, and which would have rendered it very difficult for him to conceive it possible that another could be preferred to him. But, let the cause of this be what it may, such was the fact ; he not only saw Mr. Nutcomb profuse in *petits soins* to his wife without taking any umbrage at it, but he would have witnessed the same proceeding from all the most accomplished gentlemen in Christendom, without its ever suggesting the possibility of her being shaken thereby either in her duty or affection. This is all very right and very estimable ; but, nevertheless, as a rule of action, it may be carried too far. Whenever a man dares to pay too marked a degree of attention to a married woman, it is her husband that should prevent the continuance of it ; and this chiefly to save the wife from herself becoming sufficiently aware of it to render it necessary that she, on her part, should take any active measures for the same purpose. She can never be driven to this without feeling, in some degree, wounded and degraded in her own eyes ; a species of mortification from which proper attention on the part of her husband ought to protect her.

In Isabella's case, her perfect ignorance of the manners of fashionable society, as well as her great confidence in her husband's judgment and knowledge of the world, kept her long in doubt whether Mr. Nutcomb's manners towards her deserved his being turned with indignity from her doors, or entitled him to be considered only as a particularly disagreeable man of fashion. At length, however, he took the opportunity afforded by his arriving to dine at the cottage some time before Mr. Wentworth's return from his ride, to remove these doubts.

"Charming Mrs. Wentworth!" he exclaimed, seating himself suddenly on the sofa beside her, "what an agonizing study for a man of sensibility is the expression of your sweet face!"

Isabella looked at him, "severe in youthful beauty," and silently carried the work on which she was employed to the open window. Nothing abashed, he followed her, and planted himself in an elegant standing attitude, leaning against the window-frame.

"Would to God," he resumed, "that it were not so easy, in spite of all your reserve, to discover that you are unhappy! The eye of indifference, indeed, might look on this and see nothing—but not so mine! You cannot be ignorant, loveliest Isabella!—you cannot be ignorant with what feelings I have contemplated your conjugal unhappiness! Gracious Heaven! how gladly would I cut off this right hand, could I, by so doing, convey to the breast of Wentworth one spark of the adoration that burns in my own! Loveliest of women! do me justice. Think not that I ask for anything beyond the delicious privilege of offering the consolations of devoted friendship. Would you could read my heart, and see how pure, how spotless is its devotion!"

These words were uttered both rapidly and distinctly, and Mrs. Wentworth therefore heard them all; but before another could be added, she was on the outside of the little drawing-room door.

The silent celerity of this escape might have effectually repulsed a less determined personage; but Mr. Nutcomb had often been heard to say, among his particular friends, that it was as much an etiquette for a woman to retire from the first approach of love, whether lawful or unlawful, as for the sylph of a ballet to run from the zephyr that pursues her; but that they meant no more by it.

"Beautiful creature!" he exclaimed, as she closed the door after her. "Her husband is a brute, and that alone is sufficient to insure her mine!"

Mr. Nutcomb did not intend that anybody should hear these last words; but though Isabella was beyond the reach of them, Mrs. Oldfield was not. She happened to be gathering blossoms, for the decoration of her second course, very near the open window, and scarcely a syllable of what had been spoken escaped her ear.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. WENTWORTH did not appear at table the day this scene took place—apologizing to her husband for her absence by saying, that she felt too unwell to come downstairs. The two gentlemen, therefore, enjoyed their claret *tête-à-tête*, and chess and *écarté* kept them together afterwards, till night was something more than at odds with morning.

Though with little of the gambler in his nature, Mr. Wentworth, by imperceptible degrees, had been beguiled on and on, sometimes for the honour of his skill as a first-rate chess-player, and sometimes to avoid the disgrace of appearing to value a few pounds at more than they were worth, till he had staked and lost some considerable sums to Mr. Nutcomb; and as he had not yet made known to his companion how very foolish he conceived this mode of spending money to be, the other was by no means ready to quit his hold of him. His hopes of the lady's favour was a very inferior consideration, and indulged in solely to amuse and reward himself, as it were, for submitting, in following the duties of his profession, to dulness so heavy, and manners so precise, as those of Mr. Wentworth appeared to him.

But the non-appearance of the lady on that day, and on the next, and the next, began to shake the constancy of his belief in the immutable frailty of women, and it occurred to him as not impossible, that did he remain at Shanklin longer than her patience should enable her to endure her imprisonment, she might be tempted to end it by relating to her tyrant everything he had said to her—which might end in an ejection more prompt than pleasing.

Whenever a gentleman of Mr. Nutcomb's class deems it expedient to bring a respectable acquaintance to a close, it is generally done by a process resembling that through which a lemon passes, before it is thrown away by the punch-maker—a tight, long, steady, final squeeze, and all is over.

Having learnt, by his friendly inquiries, that the lady, though three whole days had elapsed since his declaration, still declared herself unable to leave her room, he, on the morning of the fourth, determined, that ere himself and his stately host should again close their eyes in balmy sleep, he would have won a sum large enough to repay him for whatever mortification his hostess had inflicted.

In furtherance of this resolution, he became throughout the day more airy, light, talkative, and amusing than ever. Had not this talk been richly seasoned with the aliment upon which the pampered spirit of Wentworth best loved to feed,—had not flattery, gross personal flattery, tickled and beguiled him, the scheme must have fallen to the ground long before the moment of projection; for never before had his saturnine nature suffered itself to be amused for so many consecutive hours. Yet gross as was this flattery, it still wore a veil, being sometimes uttered in the shape of a philosophical remark, or thus, “You are a very singular man, Wentworth. There is something exceedingly remarkable in the manner in which your mind seems to master everything that it grapples with.” Sometimes as a blunt avowal forced from him against his will: “How the deuce is it that I find myself so irresistibly impelled to acknowledge your superiority in all things?” Or, “It is no good to deny a plain fact, however much it may rub against one’s vanity; but the truth is, that by some queer fatality or other, you never do attempt anything in which you do not immediately—hang it! that’s the rub—immediately give us all go-by.” By such, and such like, twists and turns, he contrived to make “the summer’s day short as December,” never losing sight of his object, yet so varying the devices by which he pursued it, that his proud dupe swelled into full-blown, ineffable complacency as he listened, smiling from time to time, but assuredly not in scorn, at the whimsical frankness and blunt sincerity of his lively friend.

At dinner Nutcomb declared, that he had never in his life felt so great an inclination to indulge in an extra portion of the deliciously cool wine, which, even without an ice-house, the skilful butler contrived to present to them.

The proposal was approved with the most cordial hospitality, but not even Mr. Lionel Nutcomb could find means to make Mr. Wentworth swallow a third glass of claret. So his lively companion became speedily satisfied, and their coffee was taken in the soft twilight, under the rustic porch of the cottage, amidst roses and honeysuckles, that seemed to breathe upon them in fragrant sighs, agitated by the soft sea breeze of that enchanting region.

The hour was delicious, and so was the coffee; but Mr. Nutcomb, who, notwithstanding all his admiring observance, generally contrived to arrange their occupations according to his fancy, was not inclined to waste the precious moments, the like of which he purposed not should return again, and he therefore suddenly exclaimed, “Upon my soul, Wentworth, this is very delightful; but it is like what we are taught about the flowery path that leads to evil. If we don’t both get most confounded

colds, if we sit here longer, I am greatly mistaken. Come in, in God's name!" and without waiting for an answer, he entered the house, and ensconced himself on the sofa.

"What an especial blessing is a chess-board, or a pack of cards either, after such a day of rambling as this has been. I am just too tired for anything else; are not you?"

The bell was rung, and lights and the chess-board appeared. Nothing could be better done than the gradual progress from ordinary interest to extraordinary irritation, on the part of Mr. Nutcomb. They both played with great rapidity, and he had lost two games, when, suddenly stopping short in the act of replacing the men, he said, "This is worse and worse; I can't stand it. I tell you what, Wentworth, I don't think, now, you could beat me, if I were to try a more dashing opening. You play a masterly game; but, by Jove, I think mine is the more brilliant play."

Mr. Wentworth smiled.

"You are quizzing my vanity. You pique me, Wentworth. I cannot tell how the devil it is, but is a positive fact, that I play worse with you than with any other man I ever tried; and I do believe, that if I could get over the feeling that you were too strong for me, I should have a fair chance of beating you."

Mr. Wentworth smiled again.

"Come, come, Wentworth. This is not fair. Your smile is rather too triumphant; and, by Heaven! I'll try if, by attempting a game I learnt in Russia years ago, I cannot do better against you. I'll bet you five hundred pounds I'll win a game."

"Nonsense, Nutcomb! You don't suppose I mean to swindle you in that style?"

"Then you think it impossible for me to win a game?"

"No, certainly not; for you have won several, you know. But I can hardly doubt, after the trial we have had, that if I put out my strength, I should be sure of any game we could play together."

"Perhaps you are right; but it is abominably mortifying to hear you boast of it. I tell you what, Wentworth; you have a great advantage over me in one respect, and it's hardly fair: you have been used all your life to play for no stake but glory; whereas, I have been constantly accustomed to have my attention and my faculties kept on the alert by a high stake. Give me this chance, my good fellow. If I lose five hundred, I promise you I can afford it. My uncle Patrick's estate won't be the worse for it, and I would give twice the sum to ascertain why it is that I cannot play up to you better than I do."

A gleam of light seemed to break in upon the mind of Mr. Wentworth as he listened to this speech: he began to doubt

whether his lively friend was exactly the sort of person he had taken him to be. To hazard five hundred pounds upon an experiment that appeared so greatly against him, was a degree of reckless imprudence of which he did not believe him capable; and the possibility that this *Russian game* was a device that had been kept *in petto*, to show off a *coup de maitre* to profitable advantage, suggested itself.

No man could behave better than did Mr. Wentworth under these circumstances. Determined not to judge harshly without what he should feel to be convincing proof, he quickly decided to agree to such a stake as would suffice, if his suspicions were just, to make Mr. Nutcomb put forth his play, intending, should the result prove otherwise, to treat the matter as a jest, and to refuse the stake; for, as to the Uncle Patrick's estate, though he would not have presumed to deny its existence, he strongly suspected that it was not of very large extent, and would have been as little inclined as most men to take advantage of his companion's folly, if such it proved to be.

After the expiration of the moment occupied by these thoughts, Mr. Wentworth replied; and, as his manner of speaking was never rapid, the delay had nothing ominous in it.

"Five hundred pounds, Mr. Nutcomb, is surely a higher stake than is necessary to rouse your attention; but I will play a game for two hundred, if you like it."

"Say three, and have at you," replied the other eagerly.

"Three be it, then," said Mr. Wentworth, and the game began.

There was at least as much caution used by Mr. Nutcomb not to win this game too rapidly, as not to lose it; nevertheless. Wentworth was too good a player not to perceive the very different degree of power now evinced, even in the safe, though lingering dallying with which it was played; and long before the final "check!" his mind was fully made up as to the real character of his companion.

As soon as it was ended, he paused, not to listen to the sort of juvenile artless ecstasy with which his antagonist hailed his victory; but crossing the room to a table that held his desk, he wrote a cheque for three hundred pounds, continuing occupied upon it, by dotting an *i* or crossing a *t* with peculiar care, till the bell which he had rung, in passing to the table was answered by a servant. He then rose; and, approaching the man as he stood in the doorway, put the cheque into his hand, saying aloud as he passed out, "Give this cheque to Mr. Nutcomb, and order your mistress's woman to take tea into the dressing-room."

Mr. Nutcomb doubted for a moment whether he should not follow, and demand an explanation; but, on second thoughts,

he took the cheque, and determined to rejoin his estimable mother at Ryde with as little delay as possible, certain that she would be infinitely amused, as well as everybody else to whom he should tell the story, at the egregious vanity of poor Wentworth, that had actually led him to quarrel outright because he had beat him in a game of chess.

The "industrious" gentleman was lucky enough to find a gig at the little inn, about to return to the north-side of the island, and in this he secured a place for himself, his portmanteau, and his cheque; somewhat disappointed that his host had not given him an opportunity of politely offering him his revenge in a second trial, a little chafed that so mere a girl as Isabella should have baffled a pursuit that had proved successful in all the capitals of Europe; but, on the whole, pretty well satisfied, when he remembered that the only financial memorandum which he carried away from quarters where he had so sumptuously fared, was in the shape of a cheque for three hundred pounds.

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## CHAPTER XXX.

"He, true knight, no lesser of her honour confident  
Than *he* did truly find her."

THERE was as strong a feeling of mortification as the balance-weight of Mr. Wentworth's vanity ever permitted to reach his feelings, in all the recollections connected with the sudden and very unusual intimacy he had formed with Mr. Lionel Nutcomb. That Mrs. Wentworth, senior, had vouched for all his great and good qualities certainly came in aid of all that self uttered in self-defence; nevertheless he was uncomfortable, and entered his wife's tiny boudoir, with an air of gloom that made her fear a coming storm. But in this case, what very rarely happened arrived; the look of ill-humour with which he approached her dispersed, instead of coming to a head, and beyond her hopes she was *quitte pour la peur*.

It might, however, have been better for all parties had it been otherwise. If instead of mutually shunning the name of Nutcomb, they had freely spoken it, and had each opened to the other the discoveries they had made respecting his character, much anxiety would have been spared to both.

Unfortunately, however, the motives that kept them both silent, were particularly well calculated to act strongly on their respective minds. He would, at any time, rather have held the tips of his fingers in the fire, than confess that he had been



wrong, or mistaken in any way; and she, too, would have suffered much, very much, rather than recount to her husband words which even her ignorance did not prevent her knowing might probably be atoned for, or aggravated, by blood.

So when he began to talk of the weather, she was well pleased to talk of the weather too, and when he looked into the baby's cradle, and descanted on the beauty of its little features, she pursued the theme with zealous earnestness, and thus no interval seemed left in which either could wonder why the other did not allude to the guest who, for the last three days, had made part of their family.

On the following day, however, Mr. Wentworth was not so fortunate. He did not escape hearing Mr. Lionel Nutcomb's name mentioned.

The evil offices towards the unfortunate Isabella, which her unprincipled mother-in-law had assigned to Mrs. Oldfield, had received no countermand in consequence of the dowager's newly conceived opinion, that her son would soon be released from what she called his debasing connection, by the death of his wife. The annuity, therefore, still hung before the eyes of the old woman, as a prize she might hope to clutch, should she be skilful and fortunate enough to produce, by any means, a separation between her master and her mistress. With this object for ever in view, the words she had overheard addressed to Isabella by the audacious Nutcomb, were treasured in her memory, as carefully as if they had contained a charm capable of procuring for her, at once, all that she most desired to possess.

Her first impulse, after withdrawing from the spot whence she had listened to them, was to watch for her master's return, and immediately to repeat them in his ear; but upon reflection she perceived that her object could not be obtained, unless she insinuated that they had been favourably received; and though in fact she knew not how this might be, as no word had been uttered by Isabella, and she had caught no glance of her demeanour, she had no intention of losing so admirable an opportunity by being too scrupulous in her inferences on this point; but on the whole she deemed it wisest and best to wait for the departure of Mr. Nutcomb before she brought the affair under investigation.

The sudden manner in which at last this departure took place, somewhat startled the ancient housekeeper; it looked greatly as if some discovery had taken place, and the immediate adjournment to the lady's apartment, led her to suspect than an explanation was about to follow without her assistance. But whether this explanation would lead to cementing or dividing the union it was her business to destroy, could only be ascertained by one

process, namely, that of applying her ear to the key-hole of the apartment in which she supposed it was going on.

Being well-accustomed to this mode of obtaining information, and fortunately retaining the faculty of hearing in great perfection, the old woman soon ascertained that the weather and baby became, as we have before seen, the principal subjects of discourse. She therefore prepared herself to fulfil her duty to her former mistress and to herself, on the following morning; and perceiving her present one quit the parlour immediately after breakfast, leaving Mr. Wentworth *tête-à-tête* with the newspaper, she knocked at the door, and entering with respectful caution, said,—

“Are you at leisure, sir, to let me speak a few words to you?”

“Yes, Oldfield,” he replied, “you may come in. What do you wish to say?”

“God knows, sir, I don’t wish to say it,” answered his faithful servant, “and glad would I be if the office could be made over to another; but there is no other that I know of that can do it; and let it be as painful as it will, I will do my duty.”

Rather alarmed by this solemn exordium, Mr. Wentworth sharply told her to shorten her story, by coming at once to the object of it.

“Ah! sir; I shall come to it soon enough,” she replied; “and over soon, too, for any pleasure it will give you. I have to tell you, sir, of a very shocking and disgraceful conversation, which by pure accident I overheard between the gentleman who went away last night, and—and my mistress.”

“Between your mistress and Mr. Nutcomb?” said her master, colouring highly.

“Yes, sir, between my mistress and Mr. Nutcomb,” returned the old woman, appearing to take courage from having broken the ice. “Needful it is that you should know it, but sad is the task of telling it!”

“Don’t palaver to me, woman!” cried Mr. Wentworth, with sudden violence, “if you have anything to tell, tell it, and have done.”

Mrs. Oldfield took up the corner of her white muslin apron, but was too wise to let her emotion interrupt her narrative, and proceeded,—

“It was on Monday, sir, the day Mr. Nutcomb last came; I was looking about the borders for flowers to dress the dishes, and came at last, as I always do, to the myrtle-tree beside the drawing-room window. I was stopping a moment to find my scissors, because I would not tear the tree, and I heard the voice of Mr. Nutcomb so close to me, that I am sure he must have

been standing at the open window. I don't want to affront your ears, sir, by repeating word for word his vile proposal, and it is quite enough to tell you, that he declared the most passionate love to my mistress,—called you a brute, sir, and said he would gladly lose his right hand if he could save her from your cruelty."

Wentworth's countenance became so frightfully pale, that the old woman was alarmed, and, turning towards the door, exclaimed,—

"Oh, dear, sir, how pale you turn! Let me run and get you some water."

"Stand where you are, woman!" he cried in a voice so hoarse and deep that it made her tremble. "Finish your tale! What comes next?"

"He uttered a great deal more, sir, in the same style, calling my mistress the loveliest of women, and such like wicked seduction."

"And your mistress, Oldfield? What said your mistress?" said Wentworth, almost panting for breath.

"I could not hear a word she spoke, sir," replied the house-keeper; "you know, sir, my mistress never speaks loud."

"And what happened next?"

"Indeed, sir, I don't know. I'm sure I thought I should have fallen as it was; and I made my way back to my own room, as fast as I could totter along, without trying to spy any more into what I would rather have died than find out at all."

"This is all, then?—now, go," said Mr. Wentworth, in a voice of what seemed unnatural composure.

Not sorry to escape, and flattering herself that her work was well done, the old woman retreated without waiting for a second command, gently closing the door after her.

For several minutes Mr. Wentworth remained in the place where she left him, perfectly motionless. His eyes were closed, and he breathed hard, but there was no suspension of his faculties, and after this interval, which was one of strong internal struggle, had passed, he rose, and slowly mounting the stairs, knocked at the door of his wife's dressing-room.

Her voice answered the summons with a gentle "Come in;" and, trembling as violently as he had often made her do, he entered.

Her child was in her lap, and she was fondly gazing on it, with so delightful a conviction that it was looking better than when she brought it from London, that it was with almost a happy smile she raised her eyes from it, to greet the entrance of her husband; but the effect of his aspect upon her was terrible.

A settled fear of him was unhappily too predominant in her mind for him to produce any emotion of which this feeling did not make part. Her first idea was that some cause of tremendous anger had occurred, which he was come, as usual, to wreak on her; but strange to say, no recollection of her hateful interview with Mr. Nutcomb crossed her recollection. In fact, as soon as she knew that he had left the house, she had ceased to torment herself by remembering it; and determined that he never should have an opportunity of speaking to her again, she effectually banished it from her thoughts.

Her first movement, on seeing the pale and agitated face of her husband, was to lay her child in its cradle, and prepare herself for passive endurance; but he pronounced the single word, "Isabella!" in a tone of such deep, sad feeling, and, at the same time, so gently, that she again looked up into his face, and for a dreadful instant fancied he was dying. Then it was that she remembered the villain Nutcomb, and flying to her husband, she threw her arms around him, exclaiming,—

"Marmaduke! dearest Marmaduke! Has this wretch betrayed himself? Oh! tell me, tell me, what has happened?"

"The wretch?" eagerly repeated Wentworth. "What wretch? What wretch, Isabella? Of whom do you speak?"

"Of Mr. Nutcomb, Marmaduke," she replied, "the vilest and most contemptible of men. Tell me, Wentworth, has this man any share in producing the suffering your countenance expressed as you entered? Tell me all that has passed between you, I entreat!"

"Isabella! dearest Isabella! I cannot doubt you. I do not doubt you, my dear wife!" he replied, while his features worked with violent emotion; "but might I not rather be the one to say—*Tell me all that has passed between you?*" Might I not, Isabella?"

"Oh! yes—you surely might," she said, laying her hand upon his arm, and looking up in his face with an expression of the most perfect confidence, "and I will tell you all, hateful as it is, if you will promise me, solemnly promise me, not to notice this contemptible and worthless man in any way. Say, dear Marmaduke, will you promise this?"

Wentworth returned her gaze for a moment, and then threw his arms around her, and pressed her to his bosom.

"Yes, I will promise! I will promise anything and everything you can ask, dear love. Dearest Isabella! of what value is all the beauty I have so fondly admired in you, compared to that one look of innocence which has spoken such delicious peace to my heart? Tell me, then, dearest," he said, seating

himself on the sofa, and drawing her close beside him, "tell me all think it right that I should hear."

"That would be very little," she replied, "were it not evident that you already know too much. I would very gladly have kept you ignorant of my having been insulted by a profession of love from the person you have been receiving here with so much distinction."

"Scoundrel!" muttered Wentworth between his closed teeth.

"I trust implicitly to your promise, Marmaduke," said Isabella gravely: "and encouraged by this trust, I will conceal nothing. Yes, he is a scoundrel. It is not a lady's word, but there is none it would not pain me to pronounce, that can describe him."

She then simply and distinctly related the scene without a word of further commentary, only adding, when she had finished her narrative,—“And now you will be able to guess, I suppose, Marmaduke, what the complaint was which has made me keep my room for the last three days.”

With a greater freedom of communication than had ever before existed between them, he returned her confidence by relating the chess adventure; and repeated also everything that had been said to him by Mrs. Oldfield.

To the first of those anecdotes she listened with very evident satisfaction, saying, however, with much real feeling,—“God forgive me for rejoicing at any proof of a fellow-creature's wickedness; but, indeed, I cannot, I cannot be sorry for this. In no way could we so satisfactorily have gotten rid of him. Depend upon it, the mother is as little estimable as the son. Before she went away, Marmaduke, I discovered that she did not care a single straw about the child. Let us talk no more of them; but be thankful that, in all human probability, we shall never see them more. As to Oldfield,” she added, after a pause, “I suppose she did what she thought best; and, therefore, I will not quarrel with her; but had you acted with less generous openness, Marmaduke, she might have made us both very miserable.”

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

IF, instead of plotting to separate the heart of Wentworth from his wife, and to make her feel it was impossible to live with him, the venerable Mrs. Oldfield had set all her keen wits the other way, and laboured to restore peace and love between them, she could not have succeeded better.

There was much of the fine quality which the French call by the untranslatable name of *loyauté*, in the conduct of Mr. Wentworth on this occasion. Had he felt less discomposure, he would hardly have shown himself as sensitive in all matters of honour as he really was; and had he betrayed more, he would not have given proof of the noble confidence which he reposed in his wife, and which she so well deserved. Isabella felt this generous undoubting reliance at her very heart, and reproached herself, certainly with more severity than was quite just, for having permitted any defects of temper to weaken her affection for a man so well deserving of her love.

On his side, too, the effect of this adventure was such as to render the success of his mother's unrighteous hopes less probable than ever. He had behaved well, and he knew it; a conviction soothing, under all circumstances, to the heart of man, and producing an effect on him that seemed sufficient, while it lasted, to calm all irritation, and soften every asperity.

Their "honeymoon" had passed much less smoothly than did the three or four first weeks which followed this *dénouement*. Isabella almost began to recover her good looks: and, whether from physical sympathy with her, or any other cause, it is certain that the idolized infant seemed to show indications of increasing strength. The peace which thus reigned between them appeared mutual; and Mrs. Oldfield, firmly believing it was so, wrote a most disconsolate letter to the dowager, declaring that nothing more was to be done, and hinting that she should consider herself as exceedingly ill-treated, and might perhaps say as much loud enough to be heard, if she was not handsomely rewarded for all the trouble she had taken. "It is no fault of mine, madam," she added, "if, just at the moment that I thought my job done and finished, I find it is all to begin over again—and she, too, looking as healthy again as when she first came here;—so there is no hope that way. At any rate, I have done with it. I can't do miracles, and won't try; but I hope, madam, you will be pleased to consider my earnest endeavours to obey your commands, and act towards me accordingly."

But, unhappily, Mrs. Oldfield's view of the case was not quite a correct one; not, indeed, that there was any chance of Mr. Wentworth being manœuvred into desiring a separation from a wife whom he certainly valued now considerably more than when he married her. But this fair-seeming interval of peace brought not to him the same pure enjoyment as to her. It was, in fact, preserved only by a powerful and painful effort on his part, over the restless, never-dying infirmity of his nature, which, like a stream that care and skill has compressed within embankments of insufficient strength, perpetually shows symptoms of

rebellious overflowings. For some time after the first warm ebullition of generous feeling had subsided within him, Isabella still fancied that she was basking in its influence, and it was he only who was as yet conscious of the miserable truth, that the delicious influence of exalted feelings cannot last, and that the merest and the vilest trifles can, by their perpetual recurrence, stifle and overcome the very highest. A man less chained to the belief that whatever he said or did was wise and well done, might, even as he felt this falling off of sublimity, have reasoned upon it, till he had extracted a wholesome moral lesson from his very weakness. But not so Mr. Wentworth: he would have deemed it a wilful and pernicious blindness, had he suffered two minutes' delay in the arrival of dinner, or the unlucky slapping-to of a door, or the late arrival of the post, or a soup too salt or not salt enough, or a clock too fast or too slow; or ten thousand other things of like importance—to pass without feeling and expressing unbounded indignation; and, though the tenderness which Mr. Nutcomb's affair had awakened, for some time kept Isabella sacred and apart from most of these little gusts of passion, the dismal storms by degrees resumed their former course, and not only reached her, but, by a fatality not quite peculiar to Mr. Wentworth, all that went wrong was somehow or other discovered to have its origin in the carelessness, the awkwardness, the indifference, the prejudices, or the unhappy temper of his wife.

It was melancholy to see how, by degrees, poor Isabella's fond hopes of future happiness again melted away; how she again trembled at the rising frown, and sickened at the sight of "a paper;" and sadder still was it to watch how the slight tinge of health which had begun anew to mantle on her cheek, faded and died away.

Yet even this lamentable return of a suffering, the memory of which had so lately caused her to shed tears of joy from believing that it was passed and gone for ever, did not long continue her principal cause of grief. The little Marmaduke drooped again. The innocent smile which had begun to greet the looks so often fixed upon him, and which had made her heart leap with a new and unknown joy, was lost again; a fretful, ill-omened whimpering took its place; and by gradual, but dreadfully perceptible degrees, the idol of both parents dwindled and died.

A speculating looker-on might have expected that so great a sympathy of feeling as must have arisen on this sad event, would again have brought Mr. Wentworth to the side of his lovely wife, full of pity and indulgent love,—but it was not so. He felt a selfish sorrow; and he now felt, too, in reality, a suspicion, which, merely as a mode of tormenting her, he had expressed to Isabella

several months before,—namely, that she had not made a healthy and efficient nurse to his son.

Unhappy Isabella! She listened to this reproach, and felt that it was just!—yet when he added, as heretofore, that her miserable temper was the cause of it, something within her whispered comfort;—no, not comfort; for that expresses a species of enjoyment; but her recollection of all she had endured, brought a feeling like consolation for her loss; for had her darling lived, might not he, too, have learnt to fear the rising of the sun, sure that his heart would be rung before it set again?

After the first paroxysm of his hard sorrow had passed, Mr. Wentworth announced that the remains of the precious child should be conveyed to the family mausoleum at Oakton; but within a few hours he changed his purpose, and did so, unconsciously perhaps, from feeling that he should prolong his own sufferings by it. Subsequently, therefore, it was arranged that all which remained of the third Marmaduke should rest beneath a splendid monument within the humble fane of Shanklin; and all of splendour and of pomp that could be found for the occasion at Southampton, was brought to decorate the obsequies.

Relieved by finding that the vain pageantry of a funeral procession into Somersetshire was given up, Isabella felt soothed by the idea of leaving the dear relic on a spot where his memory would be connected with the grandeur of nature, rather than with the ostentation that had been threatened, and immediately conceived the idea of following it herself to the grave. Had Wentworth been as careful of her as he ought,—had he been less completely occupied in pitying himself, he would not have permitted this;—but, on the whole, he thought the having her beside him would be less terrible than going alone; and Isabella, wrapped in a lugubrious mantle, and her pale features shaded by a long crape veil, stood with her dark-browed and repining husband beside the grave, that seemed to receive her heart as the little coffin was lowered into it.

The vicar of Shanklin had a young friend with him, who had arrived the night before to pass a part of his long vacation in the myrtle-covered paradise of the little vicarage; and while the two gentlemen breakfasted, their arrangements for the day's excursion were settled, subject to the necessity of remaining till eleven o'clock, on account of the funeral.

The young friend, enchanted with the beautiful seclusion of the spot, rambled into the churchyard with his friend, and remained there till the procession approached the church; he was then about to turn away, and pursue his walk while the cere-



mony lasted, when the clergyman whispered, "Do not leave the churchyard, Alfred, or we shall miss each other."

Thus admonished, the young man restrained his steps, and, after a moment's consideration, followed his friend into the church, as he observed a degree of pomp in the funeral array that excited his curiosity.

On seeing him enter, the clerk opened the door of a pew close beside the newly-fabricated vault; and Alfred Reynolds, the old friend and schoolfellow of Charles Worthington, installed himself in it, unconscious that he was about to watch the anguish of the lovely girl who had so profoundly touched his boyish heart but little more than one short year before,—as she leaned over the grave of her child.

The face and person of Isabella were so completely enveloped in her dark dress, that had it been her brother himself instead of his friend, he could not have recognized her as she stood there trembling beside the dark abyss. Yet the deep subdued sob that from time to time reached his ear, raised more sympathy in his heart than he had expected to feel at that chance funeral.

As long as the little coffin remained visible Isabella leaned forward, and even pushed her heavy veil aside as if to let her tears drop unimpeded upon it; but when it was wholly hid from her view, and her husband would have led her from the spot, her strength gave way and she fainted. Mr. Wentworth received her in his arms; and, dropping on one knee, supported her on his bosom, while one of the females who had accompanied her, threw back her veil and applied to her nostrils some pungent essence with which she had come prepared.

The full light of a bright autumnal sun fell direct from a south window upon the marble paleness of her features; yet, even so, Alfred Reynolds did not know her. His very heart melted in pity at sight of such overwhelming sorrow in one so young and delicately lovely; but he traced not in the delicate oval of that marble face, so thin, so sorrowful, so deadly pale, any resemblance to the bright Hebe whom he had seen laughing, dancing, singing, amidst the groves and flowers of Abbot's Preston.

A few moments sufficed to restore her senses, and she was then led away, surrounded, as when she entered, by a group of sable attendants.

"Who are these people?" said Reynolds to his friend as they quitted the churchyard. "What a lovely monumental statue was that young mother! I presume, at least, she was the mother of the infant that you buried?"

"Yes, I believe so," was the reply. "The name is Wentworth. They are mighty rich folks, I believe; for their carriages

and horses have kept all the country in wondering admiration for the last five months ; but I know nothing more about them. They have constantly attended my little church, but we have rarely exchanged even a bow."

"Wentworth?" repeated Alfred, who had heard nothing beyond the name, and had remained pondering on the possibility or impossibility that the pale face that had just been so vividly impressed upon his fancy could be that of Isabella Worthington. "Her eyes were closed," he added. "Had I seen her eyes, I must have known her!"

"Known whom, Alfred?" rejoined his friend; "that beautiful shadow that I presume to be Mrs. Wentworth?"

"Where do they come from?" inquired Reynolds, his heart beating with a violence of which he felt ashamed.

"On my word, Alfred, I never gave myself the trouble to inquire ; the man was so evidently a magnifico, that I perceived at once they had no intention to be neighbours, so I left them very peaceably alone."

"Don't you think that your servants are likely to know more about them?"

"The old fisherman that lives in that cottage yonder is more likely still," replied his friend; "for my humble applications for a share of his finny prey have met no attention during the whole summer till 'the cottage' and all its appendages were supplied."

"Let us call there before we set off," said Alfred, endeavouring to speak with composure.

"As you will," said his companion, turning towards the path that led to it. "The cottage stands in a mighty pretty nook, and you may perhaps gain a subject that may do for one of your beautiful sketches, Alfred."

At the cottage they soon gained all the information they sought, and a little more; for the gossiping wife, whose office it was to retail the produce of her husband's nets, had abundance of intelligence to bestow. "Her sister Dobbs did their charring work, and she went there herself every day. They were as rich as princes, and did not care what they gave for their fish. Oh! yes, they came from Somersetshire; but the worst of the story was, that poor young madam, with all her riches, was a miserable woman; for every servant in the house knowed as her husband was cruel bad to her."

Something corroborative of this last assertion Alfred had suspected from the language and manner of his friend Charles when speaking lately of the splendours of Oak Park; but it had been only darkly hinted, and in no degree dilated upon in any conversation that had passed between them, so that it now seemed

to fall upon his heart for the first time in an intelligible manner. It would not be easy to describe the pang which the woman's words produced in the bosom of Alfred. "Her husband cruel bad to her! Poor Isabella! Sweet, lovely Isabella!" he inwardly murmured. "She will die—she will follow her child to the grave—her happy, happy nature will never long endure harshness!"

"Do tell me, Alfred, what you know about these people," said his friend, taking his arm and leading him away. "You are looking as white as a sheet, and very much as if you were going to faint too."

"No danger of that," replied Alfred, rousing himself, "only if this story be true, I am very sorry for it; for I believe Mrs. Wentworth is the sister of the best friend I have in the world."

"Did you ever see her before?"

"Yes," replied Alfred, "I have seen her formerly,—but she is much changed. I did not know her again."

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

ISABELLA had long been suffering more, from various causes, than her constitution was able to bear; and when she returned from the funeral of her child, she was laid on a bed that she did not leave again for many weeks. Nothing could exceed the attention and anxiety displayed by Mr. Wentworth during this period, and no one who watched it, unless thoroughly acquainted with his character, could have believed that his own harsh treatment had been the sole cause of bringing her to the state he now deplored. Had he conceived the remotest idea that such was the case, a violent and perhaps a lasting change might have been produced in his habits of feeling and thinking; but the light of day is not more perfectly excluded from the dungeons of Baden's Alt Schloss, than was all such truth from his mind; and when at length she was declared out of danger, his self-congratulations were blended with the flattering persuasion that the time and care he had bestowed on her during her illness had probably saved her life.

The day after the death of her child, Isabella had written the account of her loss to her sister Margaret; and, in the anguish of her heart, dwelt upon the increased misery which she suffered from Mr. Wentworth's conviction, that the delicacy of her own health had occasioned the death of her child. On receiving this heart-breaking letter, Mrs. Norris's feelings towards her

brother-in-law were irritated to the highest pitch. With streaming eyes she hung over the sad expressions of self-condemnation with which her sister deplored the mistaken and selfish tenderness which had perhaps cost her baby its life, and while her hand still trembled with emotion, she wrote a hasty reply, which, from her having been officially informed by the positive command of Mr. Wentworth that her letters were no longer subjected to his perusal, was in a tone of unreserved sincerity that she had never before indulged. After the tenderest expressions of participation in her grief, there came the following passage:—"For Heaven's sake, my darling Isabella, increase not the sorrow that has fallen upon you, by listening to the unfeeling suggestion of Mr. Wentworth. You know, dearest, how cautiously I have ever abstained from expressing any opinions I may have formed upon his character; but at this moment I cannot refrain from saying, that if your health has been failing, it is his conduct that has been the cause of it. No health was ever better than yours, dear girl, till you left your father's roof. My kind-hearted Frederick, who stands with his eyes full of tears beside me, bids me tell you not to suffer words equally cruel and foolish to dwell upon your mind."

This letter reached Shanklin when the danger of Isabella was at the height, and was left with several others, unopened and uncared for, on the drawing-room table; and it was only after all alarm for her life had subsided, that Mr. Wentworth sat down to examine the accumulation of despatches which demanded his attention.

When he came to that of Mrs. Norris, he laid it aside for his wife; and having got through the rest, scribbled a few lines to his mother, apologizing for the neglect of her letters, and told his steward that the family would return to Oak Park as soon as Mrs. Wentworth should be ready to travel; he prepared to go upstairs in order to give it to her. But ere he reached the door, it struck him that this letter in her sister's hand, the only one received since they had lost their child, must certainly allude to that event, and might, if rashly given to Isabella, produce emotions highly injurious.

It is but justice to Mr. Wentworth to say that this reasoning was perfectly sincere, and altogether unmixed with any other feeling or motive; nevertheless, it is equally certain that no man who had not entertained the notion that opening his wife's letters was only an orthodox proof of conjugal confidence, would ever have thought of opening this. As it was, however, he scrupled not to break the seal, as soon as he had come to the conclusion that it would be imprudent for her to do it herself, and read the contents from beginning to end.

No words in ordinary use can convey any idea of the whirlwind of rage and indignation that then took possession of his mind, nor could the most violent language of tragedy be justly termed hyperbolical if used to express it. On this occasion, however, it was not against his wife. It was evident that she had not complained of what he had said respecting the origin of the child's illness, as of anything unkind; but, on the contrary, seemed clearly to have adopted it as true and rational. No: it was not his wife, it was the ungrateful Norris, whom, despite his mother's often-repeated opposition, he had determined to make rector of Oakton—it was he, and his insidious, fair-seeming Margaret, who, thus leagued together against him, were labouring to undermine his Isabella's affection. After the first terrible gust of passion was over, he sat down and took counsel with himself as to what he should do with the letter. To let his wife see it was every way out of the question; and, after much deliberation, he determined upon sending it back to the hands from whence it came, together with an explanation of the reasons which had induced him to open it. His letter, which was addressed to Mr. Norris, concluded with these words.

"It is probable that your wife received correctly from mine the terms on which, to gratify her, I promised to bestow the living of Oakton upon you; and Mrs. Norris will have told you, sir, that this promise was conditional, depending wholly upon my finding your character on further acquaintance such as I could approve. Need I say, sir, that I do not approve a vile, cowardly, underhand attempt to rob me of my wife's affection. The accounts from Nice are such as to render it probable that I shall have to present to it very shortly, and the person I shall select will reside in the parsonage-house. It will be, therefore, desirable that you should forthwith seek a residence elsewhere. My wife still lies in a very precarious state; and as any allusion to this guilty business might endanger her life, no letters will be permitted to reach her that have not previously been examined by me."

Perhaps the strongest proof of attachment that Mr. Wentworth ever gave his wife, was shown in the effort he made to conceal from her the rage which long glowed within him in consequence of Mrs. Norris's unfortunate letter. As soon as he had despatched it, together with his violent, and, considering the circumstances of the young couple, most cruel reply, he ordered his horse, and rode for three hours, with the intention of calming his indignation before he appeared in the presence of Isabella. To have done this on any occasion less important than that offered by the danger of her life, he would have accounted little better than a paltry artifice to conceal feelings

which did him honour; but now he soothed himself as he rode along, with the persuasion that no husband had ever made so tremendous an effort for the health and tranquillity of his wife.

A few weeks of gradual and slow recovery restored sufficient strength to Isabella to permit of her travelling, and she arrived at Oak Park with her husband, and an ostentatious suite of servants, the first week in December. Nothing could be more wretchedly disconsolate than her feelings, as she drove through the noble grounds which led to her mansion. No hope of joyous greetings cheered her return. She might indeed see her beloved parents, dearer to her a thousand times than ever they had been in her happy days; she might see her sister, the beloved companion and friend who had shared those days; but how would she see them?—like a state prisoner, immured within a splendid fortress, where she was treated with feigned respect, but debarred from the indulgence of every feeling, and of every faculty that made life desirable. And where was the idolized infant who lay warm upon her bosom when she left this palace-prison? Where was the health, the energy, which used to make existence a luxury? Large heavy tears chased each other down her sunken cheek, as those thoughts pressed upon her, and, too deeply sunk in reverie to remember that they were visible, she permitted them to flow unrestrained.

Mr. Wentworth, meanwhile, who had but ill-endured his long detention from the paternal acres on which he batted his pride, felt his heart swell with very pleasing emotions as he compared the noble extent of his magnificent park with all he had seen during his absence. In this pleasant mood, he turned his eyes upon his weeping wife, intending to congratulate her in very graceful phrase upon her return to her own mansion. The sight of her countenance gave a check to his feelings which was greatly the reverse of agreeable, and, in that tone of his which his poor wife always felt to be so bitter, and which he classed as perfectly polite, he said, "May I take the liberty, Mrs. Wentworth, of inquiring what it is you see in this approach to your home which can justify or occasion these tears?"

Not to answer a question, or not to answer it directly, were offences which she had long known were considered by her husband as very nearly unpardonable; and her bruised and weary spirit shrinking from the dreaded reprimand, she answered in almost a whisper, "I was thinking of my boy." Her face, her voice, and the words she uttered were all calculated very effectually to change the agreeable current of his thoughts; and his first feeling very nearly approached to indignation, as his grievous loss and disappointment were thus suddenly brought before him.

"Think you, madam, that you alone feel this loss?" was his reply. "It will be better for us both, if you please, not to recur to this dreadful subject for the future. Those who make the greatest display of feeling rarely suffer the most from it."

These words were spoken as the carriage stopped; and, notwithstanding the displeasure they manifested, Mr. Wentworth handed her from it with an air of the most attentive politeness, giving her his arm as she slowly dragged her tottering limbs up the steps of the magnificent portico, in a style of graceful dignity that could not fail of being admired by the half-dozen servants who stood waiting at the hall-door to receive them.

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Heartily as every member of Isabella's family disliked to enter the abode of Mr. Wentworth, they all came to embrace her the day after her return, except, indeed, the venerable Colonel Seaton. Knowing the tender attachment that had existed between him and his "particular little niece," as he was wont to call her, Mrs. Worthington good-naturedly urged his accompanying them on this visit.

"The weather is still so mild, uncle David," said she, "that the drive cannot hurt you."

"There may be something more inclement than the sky," replied the old man. "I cannot go to Mr. Wentworth's house, dear niece. Better, far better, never to see my pretty darling more, than to see her—as you will do to-day."

Mrs. Worthington remembered his words, and quoted them to her husband as they drove home again.

"Alas! alas!—uncle David was right, Henry. So soon, so very soon, to see her faded thus! What must she not have suffered to bring her to this state."

"Her health—'tis her health, Margaret," replied her husband, in a voice that showed his feelings had mastered his manhood. "She has been very ill, you know; and she has lost her child. Do not let us believe that it is he who has changed her thus, wife!—I cannot bear it!"

"The worst is not come yet," replied the weeping mother. "Think what she will feel when she knows—and know it she soon must—that Margaret is to be driven from her home!"

The fear that this news might affect the feeble Isabella too painfully was not confined to her parents; Mr. Wentworth himself shrunk from the idea of communicating it; and, within a week after their return, he condescended to signify to Mr. Worthington his willingness to permit Mr. Norris's continued residence near him till the death of Mr. Roberts gave him an opportunity of giving the preferment to his late tutor at Cambridge.

"I suspect, Mr. Wentworth," said his father-in-law, colouring. "that Norris will hardly be inclined to accept your permission. And it is possible he may tell you, sir, that you have neither power to keep him at Oakton nor to send him from it, so long as Mr. Roberts remains alive."

"And if he does tell me so, Mr. Worthington, I shall reply to him, as I now do to you, by observing, that the only power I dream of exercising on the movements of Mr. Roberts's curate are such as belong to me as a person of influence and fortune, as patron of the living, and as permitting a corner of land, taken from my own shrubberies to make part of the rector's lawn, towards a hired stipendiary, whom that rector has placed to perform, during his own absence, the duties of the office to which my father appointed him. If, however, it be his will to defy me, either by going or staying, let him do it; the time may come that he shall repent it sorely. Meanwhile, let him be informed, sir, if you please, that it is the precarious state of my wife's health which has induced me to wish that the final separation from her sister should be delayed."

This was, indeed, an argument not to be resisted; and no sooner had his son-in-law mounted his stately steed and departed, than the good rector called for his rough pony; and, taking a shorter cut through a lane not yet quite impassable, arrived at the dwelling of his eldest daughter with more promptitude than he would have wished to make known to the proud husband of the younger.

Here everything had already begun to wear the uncomfortable aspect of removal. Mr. Norris was employed in packing up his books, while poor Margaret, in a condition that rendered her less active than of yore, sat disconsolately on a cushionless sofa, handing him the volumes which stood ranged on a table before her.

"Stay your hand, my dear Norris," said Mr. Worthington; "I have just had a visit from your delectable neighbour, and he has desired me to make known to you his impertinent permission for your remaining here as long as Mr. Roberts lives."

"It comes too late, my dear sir," replied the young man, pursuing his occupation with rather increased activity, while a flush of indignation mounted to his temples. "I go, not for his pleasure, which he has no power of enforcing, but for my own; and trust me that for his pleasure I will not stay."

"Listen, Frederick, listen," resumed Mr. Worthington, "you are not a whit more averse to indulging Mr. Wentworth's insolence than myself. But there is another, Norris," he continued, with a faltering voice, "whom we would none of us willingly



treat harshly. There is our poor Isabella, who I fear—I fear will not be long among us; and for her sake it is that I would ask you to comply with his hint.”

“Does Mrs. Wentworth request our stay?” said Norris, tossing back the book he held in his hand upon the table, and looking up with an expression of the tenderest pity in his sweet-tempered blue eyes.

“She has yet to learn, Frederick, that there has been any idea of your going,” replied Mr. Worthington.

“Then, dearest husband, think of her only!” said Margaret, removing her handkerchief from her eyes, which had overflowed the moment her sister’s name was mentioned. “She is too, too wretched to bear more; let us go or let us stay, as papa thinks best for her. Dear Isabella!—how well he knows her love for me! He has not then dared, papa, has he, to confess to her the reading of my letter?”

“He did not name it,” replied her father; “but it seems evident that he has not, or he could not talk of sparing her feelings by your remaining here.”

“Then the books shall walk back again without delay. For Mr. Wentworth, whom I despise from the very bottom of my heart, I would not sacrifice the most trifling whim that ever crossed my fancy; but for his wife—for your dear sister, my sweet Margaret, I would walk barefoot in the mud from here to Taunton beside his prancing courser!”

Margaret, for all answer, gave him a fond wife’s tenderest kiss; and, before Mr. Worthington left them, it was agreed that no answer whatever should be sent to Mr. Wentworth’s message, that the lodging taken at Taunton should be given up, and that they should remain *in statu quo* till the long-expected death of Mr. Roberts should make their removal necessary.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE winter passed slowly and gloomily away for Isabella: every day seemed to render Mr. Wentworth less disposed to associate with the families in the neighbourhood; of her own family she saw very little, and that little in a way to give her infinitely more pain than pleasure. Her health was failing, and her spirit never permitted to rest in peace for half an hour together. The spring followed without rendering her existence in any degree less sad. Her sister had given birth to a lovely, prosperous boy, but this she was not permitted to see; her

husband declaring that her health was in too delicate a state for her to see a child that might remind her of her own without danger.

Mr. Wentworth was no very punctual attendant upon the business of Parliament; his silent vote being always with the ministry, he was known to be one on whom an opposition man might reckon when he wanted to pair off, and he rarely troubled himself to do more than show himself once or twice in his seat till after Easter. As this season approached, he declared his intention of again taking a furnished house in town. Isabella, of course, had no voice in the business; and had, in truth, too little enjoyment anywhere to care greatly where her heavy hours were spent. A renewed attack of nervous debility, to which she was now very subject, occurred a few days before the negotiation for the house was finally settled, and the physician who attended her from Taunton then gave it as his opinion, that the air and hours of London would, probably, be most seriously injurious to her.

This was quite sufficient at once to put a stop to the plan: Mr. Wentworth decided upon taking lodgings for a few weeks in the Albany Chambers, and promised, if possible, to bring his mother down with him on his return: a prospect of future annoyance, which Isabella thought she should bear the better for the tranquillity in which the interval before it arrived would be passed. Dead as her heart had become to everything like hope, it is possible that the idea of occasionally seeing her mother and sister without restraint, might have occurred to her; but if this were so, disappointment followed close upon it; for, on the evening preceding his departure, Mr. Wentworth thus addressed her:—

“Were my mother a few years older, my dear Isabella, and less pre-eminently calculated to shine in society, I should certainly ask her to pass the time of my absence here. You are too young, my love, and too delicate in health, for me to leave you without anxiety. But there is one point, Isabella, upon which I must beg you to listen to me with peculiar attention, and concerning which you must give me a promise that may, in some degree, set my heart at rest. I allude to your intercourse with your own relations. It is painful to me to mention any subject that may distress you; but it is absolutely necessary that before I depart I should remind you once again, that such an immense interval exists between your present station and theirs, that any greater familiarity than I have permitted, would be of the greatest injury to my position in general society. I am far from meaning to say that you may not see your mother during my absence. On the contrary, should you be particu-

larily unwell, I would wish you to send for her; I should not even object, on such an occasion, to your ordering one of the carriages to go for her; but I can permit no dinner-visiting during my absence. I wish you to receive no one, and, if possible, I still less wish that you should dine or even drink tea from home. I have your word for this, my love, have I not?"

"Of course, Wentworth, I shall obey your directions in all things," she answered.

"That is all I wish," he obligingly replied; "and if anything further occurs to me, as important, I shall not fail to write to you concerning it."

The morning of his departure was singularly cold and stormy for the season. The winds had done their worst to shake the well-fitted sashes through the night, and now the rain and hail beat against them, as if to try their power in turn.

"It is a dreadful morning, Marmaduke," said Isabella; "could you not postpone your journey till to-morrow?"

"With my style of travelling, my love," he replied, with a smile, "the weather is of vastly little consequence. My own horses, you know, will only go with me the first stage, so what does it signify?"

And so they parted, his last words being—

"Remember, Isabella, the instructions you received from me last night; and remember, also, that while I live I can never forgive or excuse the slightest opposition to my will. Now kiss me, my love. God bless you! Let me hear from you regularly every Monday and Thursday, and be certain of receiving constant letters in return. Farewell!"

As these valedictory commands were unknown at Abbot's Preston, Oakton, and the long-unvisited spinster's retreat at Appleby, the absence of Mr. Wentworth was hailed at each as the signal for the temporary restoration of Isabella to their long-restrained, but unfading love.

The morning he left his house was one on which neither man nor beast would have quitted shelter could they have helped it; but on the following day the sun rose unclouded, and determined, as it seemed, to avenge himself for his disgrace of yesterday. Isabella looked out upon the beautiful April landscape, where every drop that hung upon the grass seemed converted into a gem of price, and felt sure that her banished kindred would not let the morning pass without coming to her. She longed for, yet dreaded their arrival; to welcome and embrace them, unrestrained by any cold proud eye looking at and reproving her, would be happiness; but to let them depart without saying "Come again," would be terrible.

When they arrived, however, which, with the exception of the self-excluded Colonel Seaton, and the indignant Christina, they all did before mid-day, all pain was, for a few short moments, forgotten in the unrestrained delight of telling them again and again how dear they were. Yet even this heartfelt joy soon brought a pang along with it, as they all remembered that the dear fading creature, whose heart was still so full of all its early love, would soon again be placed beyond their reach, almost as much as if she were already dead.

Her fond, gentle-natured father perceiving that tears were rapidly taking place of smiles, hoped to postpone all melancholy thoughts for the present, by saying, "Now, good folks, let us make some arrangement for the day. Come back with us, Isabella, will you, dear love, and see good uncle David once more? The weather is so delicious that the drive can do you nothing but good, and we will dine as early as you please, and bring you back again."

This speech was a very bad device for banishing tears from Isabella's eyes. She looked round on all the dear expectant faces waiting for her answer, and unable to restrain herself, buried her head on her mother's shoulder, and wept bitterly.

No open avowal of her conjugal unhappiness had yet passed her lips; this forbearance had begun from principle, and had been sustained, perhaps, in a great measure by necessity; for rarely indeed had she enjoyed unembarrassed intercourse with her family. But whatever restraint the reserve which was become habitual, or the fear of giving them pain, might occasion, now altogether gave way, and when, at length, she raised her head and again met their affectionate looks all fixed upon her, she exclaimed,—

"Do not ask me, dearest, dearest father!—never ask me again! I dare not—I may not come to you!"

No explanation was required to make this sad confession intelligible; but long as they had been aware of the restraint in which she lived, and the impossibility of her being happy under it, this open avowal of her thralldom seemed to come upon them all with the stunning effect of an unexpected blow.

"Is it indeed so, my poor child!" said Mr. Worthington mournfully. "Then God give us patience to bear it as we ought to do! But it is a heart-breaking termination to all our hopes in thee, my darling Isabella!" And the gay-hearted happy-spirited Mr. Worthington wept like a child.

"Has he then left orders with you, my poor Isabella, that you were not to come to us?" said her mother.

Isabella could not speak, but she bent her head to signify that so it was.

"Then he is the most hard-hearted cruel husband that ever poor girl had!" said Miss Lucy, sobbing. "Alas, Isabella!" she continued, "how did I ever think to say that my fate was happier than yours! God forgive me, my dear child! but I do hate him from the very bottom of my heart."

"Do not hate him, aunt Lucy," replied Isabella gently. "Believe me, he is greatly to be pitied."

"Pitied!" exclaimed Mrs. Norris, with some bitterness. "Surely, surely, Isabella, you deceive yourself in this. What but his own evil will has converted a position apparently so happy as yours, into—into what it is, my poor sister?"

"I cannot pity him, Isabella!" said her weeping mother; "for he has robbed me of my child—cruelly, basely, deceitfully robbed me of her. How can I ever forgive myself for the joy, the vain unthinking triumph, with which I welcomed his addresses? Tell me, dearest, dearest girl, tell me truly,—was it this, was it this insane joy, which I know was not concealed, was it this that made you leave your happy home to marry him?"

"No, mother, it was not," replied Isabella solemnly. "I loved Mr. Wentworth, and I think that I could love him still, if—if he would let me."

"Wretch!" muttered Mrs. Worthington, turning her head from the pale, altered face of Isabella, the gentle but woe-worn expression of which was too sad to look upon.

"No, dear mamma, no! He is no wretch! Wentworth has a thousand noble qualities. I have no strength to tell long stories now; but I could prove to you, if I had, and you would listen to me patiently, that there is much to admire and to love, did not his most unhappy disposition destroy it all."

"There can be no stories long enough, or strong enough, Isabella, to make me forgive him for those sunken eyes, and that pale melancholy face," said the unhappy mother, weeping anew.

"Yet, hear me, mother—hear me, all of you," said Isabella, speaking with great firmness,—“I know I am ill, and there would be no kindness, perhaps, in concealing from you that I believe myself in a decline, from which it is not likely that I should ever recover; but this, mother, is the hand of God. Had it been his pleasure to give me greater firmness, I should have borne the loss of my poor child, and all else that has befallen me, with less suffering. I believe, indeed, that my early life was much too happy to have made any change in it desirable. But this is not what I was going to say. Will you all promise me that, should I not recover from the state of health which my boy's death has brought upon me—will you all promise me that you will never utter anything to injure Mr. Wentworth in the opinion of the neighbourhood?"

"And so pave the way for his finding another happy innocent being to share his splendour while he breaks her heart? Is it for this you are providing, Isabella?" said her sister, with deep feeling.

Isabella's pale cheek was for a moment tinted by a lovely flush, and she hastily replied, "No, not so, Margaret; I mean not that. I would never wish another——." She stopped short, leaving the sentence unfinished, but not so its meaning.

"No, my child, you are incapable of such deliberate cruelty," said Mr. Worthington, in a tone of bitterness that was very unusual to him. "But let us not discuss this subject further. God heal you, my poor girl! His mercy is over all His works, my Isabella; and he will not forget the innocent and heavy-laden. You are very pale again, my poor child. We had better go, I believe, for none of us will do the others any good now."

"And must I leave you, Isabella," said her mother, "with the belief that you are very ill, yet without the privilege of coming to you?"

"Not so, mamma," she replied, endeavouring to speak cheerfully; "on the contrary, Mr. Wentworth's last injunctions were, that if I felt ill, I should immediately send the carriage for you. I will not deny his having, at the same time, expressed his wish that, during his absence I should neither dine out, nor receive company at home, and it would be folly to say that this restriction was not painful; but it is my duty to obey it, nevertheless; is it not, mother?"

"Do not ask me. I am in no state to give you counsel, Isabella; were I to attempt it, I might be likely to say what I should repent of afterwards. Farewell, sweet love! The worst of it is, my Isabella, that there is no hope of our ever meeting or parting with less pain than to-day."

This was too true to be answered or commented upon; sadly, and almost silently, they parted; a long and close embrace from each saying more to the melancholy mistress of the noble mansion than any words could have done.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV

DESPITE, however, of Isabella's solitude and sadness, and despite, too, of something very like a wish that she felt ill enough to justify her sending for her mother, the symptoms of general debility and nervous weakness became less distressing. The certainty of not being scolded, the assurance that she might

enter her dressing-room without finding a "paper" on the table, and the power of taking up a book without the expectation of being told in five minutes that it would be better for her health to lay it down again, all acted favourably upon her; and, cheered by the unwonted feeling of tranquillity which surrounded her, she trusted to the security of her locked post-bag, and ventured to write sundry comforting notes to her mother, sister, and aunt, declaring herself better in health, and resigned in spirit, as long as she could feel sure that they doubted not her love, and that she possessed theirs, undiminished, in return.

One week had passed since the departure of her husband; she had written to him, according to order, two letters, and according to his promise was expecting a record from him in return, when the letter-bag was brought in and laid before her on the table.

It was with a feeling a little analogous to what she had often experienced on opening a "paper," that she sought for the Bramah key among the trinkets of her watch-chain, and sighed as she turned it in the lock.

The bag contained but two letters: the first she took up was addressed to Mrs. Oldfield, in the handwriting of the dowager, the second was to herself, but in a character quite unknown to her. With a mixture of curiosity and surprise she hastily tore it open, and the contents almost turned her to stone. The letter ran thus:—

"HONOURED MADAM,

"By order of the dowager Mrs. Wentworth I am to execute the awful task of telling you that my poor master is no more. I would break it to you, madam, more by degrees if I knew how to do it, but I do not. The way he came by his death was very terrible, being by the hand of man and not of God. That Mr. Nutcomb, it seems, had a quarrel with my poor master about money won unfairly before he left the cottage so suddenly the last time he was there; and as ill-luck would have it, they met again—at some club, I think it was—when my master affronted him, as I dare say he richly deserved, and the consequence was their fighting a duel, in which my poor master fell.

"There is one thing more, madam, which I think it is my duty to state, though I received no orders to do it. The morning before my master went out to fight, he got news, as he told the doctor that brought him home, in my hearing, that old Mr. Roberts, our parson at Oakton, was dead. This in course would not be worth naming to you, madam, at such a terrible moment as this, but for what followed, and that was said to me too. 'Remember, sir,' he said to the surgeon, 'and you, Philip, remember too,' he said to me, 'that it is my wish and will that the living of Oakton should be given to my brother-in-law, Mr. Norris, who is now residing in the parsonage-house.' The surgeon promised, and so did I, and it seems to me, madam, that the best way to do my part of it is by giving the intelligence to you."

This appalling letter was signed with the name of Philip Saunders, and dated from Mr. Wentworth's apartments in the Albany Chambers. The shock it produced on the weakened mind and body of Isabella was terrible; she did not faint, nor for many hours shed a single tear, but remained almost stupified and perfectly incapable of doing anything in consequence of the intelli-

gence she had received, though a sort of vague wish that her mother and father were with her, made itself felt by degrees that became stronger and stronger as her startled intellect returned.

How long she had remained thus she had herself no idea, and it was not till the servant entered with the usual morning refreshments that she fully recovered her consciousness. The momentous letter had dropped from her hand on the floor, while that to Mrs. Oldfield still lay on the table before her. Startled by the singular expression of her countenance, and the more than ordinary pallor of her sickly cheek, the man hastened to deposit his tray, and hurried to the housekeeper's room to inform Mrs. Oldfield that his "missus" looked startled out of her wits, and that there was a letter directed to herself lying on the table.

This was quite enough to make the old woman take her way to the drawing-room, with a pace considerably quicker than she generally condescended to use. She entered the room without ceremony, and for a moment stood gazing on the bewildered face of Isabella—who, rather relieved than otherwise by her presence, exclaimed,—

"Oldfield! I am glad you are come."

"What is the matter, madam?" said the housekeeper, advancing towards the table; "you look strangely frightened, ma'am."

"Yes, I am frightened, Oldfield," replied Isabella. "But it is not true—it cannot be true. Yet I wish you would send for my mother, and my father, too, Oldfield,—the house is so very large and lonely."

While the agitated Isabella thus expressed herself, Mrs. Oldfield approached the table and possessed herself of the letter which bore her name. The seeing her take it, appeared to recall the recollection of her mistress, for she said, "You are quite right, Oldfield—that letter is for you—it is the handwriting of his mother, is it not?"

"It is the writing of the dowager Mrs. Wentworth, ma'am," replied the old woman, slipping it into the profundity of her pocket; "but be pleased to tell me, ma'am, if anything has happened to vex you?" This inquiry was made with a feeling of very sincere interest in its answer; for the old woman began to suspect that the dowager, once more finding herself *tête-à-tête* with her son, had found means to persuade him of all she wished he should believe, and that her young mistress's agitation was occasioned by learning some very disagreeable result of their confidential intercourse. In answer to Oldfield's inquiry whether anything had vexed her, Isabella replied with a countenance of horror, and a shudder that seemed to shake her whole frame, "Oldfield!—he is dead!"



"Dead!" screamed the old woman; "in God's name, what is it you mean? Who is dead, madam?"

"Your master, Oldfield—your master and my husband is dead!"

"Great God!" cried the housekeeper, wringing her hands, "it is impossible!" and without awaiting reply, she very abruptly made her exit, in order to peruse at her leisure the document which would end all her doubts.

Having reached the comfortable apartment sacred to her use, she briskly locked herself in; and approaching the window, with spectacles on her nose, broke the seal, and perused the following lines:—

"Oldfield! I write to you under the greatest anguish that ever fell upon me. My son, my noble-minded, my excellent, my unmatched son is dead! His precious life lost in a duel with one who, for my eternal torment, I must ever remember that I introduced to him. I hardly know how my mind has power at such a moment to turn from the dear precious dead, and waste a thought upon the worthless living. But so it is. We are creatures made up of contradictions—enigmas that never can be solved—and even in this hour of anguish my thoughts turn with harassing doubts and fears to the consideration of the noble fortune left behind him. If he has made a will, I can hardly doubt that is greatly in my favour. He may perhaps have bequeathed some testimony of his misplaced silly love to the woman who for somewhat more than twenty months has borne his name; but if, unhappily, it should appear that he has left no will, the question concerning the settlement he may have made upon her becomes a very important one. I hate her and all her race, and this she knows perfectly well, which naturally makes me anxious to discover that her claims on the property may not be very considerable. I have never been able to learn from him whether he made any settlement at all, and I rather flatter myself he did not. The bursts of indignation which escaped when first he made known his mad intention raised a barrier between us on all such subjects, which has never been removed. What I want from you, Oldfield, is, that you should obtain information on this subject as speedily as possible. This, you will of course find easy enough. If, contrary to my hope and belief, he has given this insignificant girl any considerable rent-charge on the estate, you will easily discover it from the tone and manner of her vulgar relations. They will crow too loud to be unheard if their portionless miss is left with some hundreds a year to play the grandee with. I must own now, Oldfield, that I wish the child had lived; but my poor head reels—I often feel as if I doubted the reality of my misery, and at this moment I hardly know what I have written, nor could I read it for the world! But let it be as confused as it will, you must be able to understand from it that I want to know, as quickly as possible, how the widow is left. If he has made neither settlement nor will in her favour, she will be justly punished for her presumption, by falling back into the thatched cottage from which he took her.

"I am always your friend,

"WENTWORTH."

Here was food enough for speculation, conjecture, hope, and fear,—and the old woman remained almost entranced in the meditation to which it gave rise, till the ringing of the drawing-room bell aroused her. On ordinary occasions this bell spoke not to her, and had been heard a thousand times without disturbing the dignified independence of her existence; but now she almost knocked down the footman in her eagerness to be the first that should answer it.

She found the young widow in a state which differed little from that in which she had left her, excepting that the idea of having her parents sent for had become sufficiently strong and defined to make her ring and give orders for the carriage to go for them.

Nothing could more plainly show how strong the mental shock had been, than the effect produced by the entrance of the housekeeper. Isabella had long felt conscious that this woman was a spy upon her, and had suffered infinitely more from the belief that she was so at the bidding of her master than she would have done, had she been aware of the correspondence kept up between her and the dowager. The appearance of the old woman at the moment she was about to do so unusual a thing as the giving an order seemed to frighten her.

"I am really ill, Oldfield," she said—"I believe I am very ill; and he said—your master said—I was to send for my mother if that happened."

"William!" said the housekeeper, turning to the footman who had followed, "order the carriage to be got ready instantly to go for Mrs. Worthington. That is what you mean?" said the housekeeper interrogatively, and with great respect.

"Yes, yes; but let it bring my father too."

"Shall I send word what has happened, ma'am?" said the old woman. "Nobody knows it yet; but I can write a line if you please."

"I will write," said Isabella, seeming to collect her thoughts. But when the paper and pen were put before her, and she attempted to express what she wished to say, it appeared evident that her faculties were in no state to execute the task.

Mrs. Oldfield quickly perceived this, and silently taking the pen from her hand, wrote as follows:—

"REVEREND SIR,—

"The post has brought dreadful news to my mistress. My honoured master has lost his life in a duel. Please, sir, to come without delay to my poor mistress, together with your lady. She is in great want of the consolation of your presence."

When these words were written, the housekeeper put them in Isabella's hand, saying, "Will this do, ma'am?" and she read them rapidly. "I thank you, Oldfield, thank you," she said. "Now go, William, go directly; but don't leave me, Mrs. Oldfield, or else send Wilson to me. I forget, Wilson is with Margaret now;" and then appearing suddenly to recollect herself, she added, "Why cannot I have Margaret? I must have friends near me. Go to Mrs. Norris, go very quickly, will you? and tell her I am ill, very ill—go, will you, Mrs. Oldfield?"

"I will send this moment, ma'am," said the housekeeper,

leaving the room—muttering as she closed the door, “We shall know soon, I suppose, what right she has to send right and left in this fashion. Not much at Oak Park, I fancy, at any rate; but no matter. There will be mourning and presents perhaps—there is no saying; and there can be no harm done by beginning as if she was somebody. Besides,” continued the sharp old woman, “the sooner her own people get about her, the sooner shall I be able to answer my old mistress’s questions. ’Twill be easy enough to judge, by their way of going on, if there is any great settlement upon her; so no time shall be lost in getting Mrs. Curate here. I say! Richard! Richard! Isn’t there one single soul in the house that can answer when I call?” and the *prima donna* stalked into the servants’ hall, where very nearly every servant in the house stood open-mouthed to hear the imperfect news that William was in the act of delivering.

“Are you not ashamed, all of you, to stand gossiping here at such a time as this?” said Mrs. Oldfield, scowling round her with great indignation. “Coachman! you ought to be half-way to Abbot’s Preston by this time; and you, Richard, run as fast as your legs can carry you to the parson’s, and tell his wife to come here this very instant.” Curiosity, however, was on this occasion stronger than even their respect for Mrs. Oldfield; and, without stirring an inch, they nearly all uttered in chorus, “What *has* happened, Mrs. Oldfield?” William says that he is sure master is dead,”—“Or his mother at the very least,” added William.

“Well, then, if he has told you that your master is dead, he has told you all that there is to know; so be off this very instant, and leave gossiping, or you shall be sent packing, as sure as I stand here, without mourning or gratuity either; do you hear that?”

They did hear it; and the effect was a general dispersion, the consequence of which was the departure of the carriage for Abbot’s Preston, and of Richard for the performance of his shorter expedition, which expedition he chose to make shorter still, by taking the liberty of leaping over the fence that divided the gardens. Had uncle David witnessed this manœuvre, it is not improbable that he would have guessed at once the real state of the case.

Three bounds brought the messenger to a flower-bed close to the drawing-room window, in which Mr. Norris was planting out mignonette, because it was the favourite flower of his Margaret; but as he did it, he breathed a sigh, that he would not, however, have suffered her to hear, at remembering how probable it was that they should be driven from their little paradise before it bloomed.

The voice of the messenger was in his ear before he knew that any one save himself was in the garden. "Please, sir," said the man, who, out of breath and without his hat, announced before he spoke that he brought urgent news,—“please, sir, to let madam come directly; for my master is dead, sir, and my mistress is all I don't know how.”

“Your master dead!” exclaimed Mr. Norris, looking at his livery; “good God! what do you mean?”

“Just that, sir,” said the man. “He is dead, poor gentleman! beyond all manner of doubt.”

“Dead!” again repeated Mr. Norris, without stirring a step, and still holding his dibble in one hand, and his mignonette plants in the other.

“As sure as you are alive, sir,” replied Richard; “and please to tell madam, sir, that she is wanted.”

“Who sent the message?” inquired Mr. Norris; “was it Mrs. Wentworth herself?”

“That's more than I can say, sir. When master's out we get no orders excepting from Mrs. Oldfield, and it was she that sent me now.”

“Has notice of this been sent to Mr. Worthington?” asked Mr. Norris.

“The carriage was just getting ready as I started, sir, and you may rely upon it they'll be here in no time, and 'tis before they come, sir, that you and madam are wanted so terrible bad.”

“We will come instantly,” said Mr. Norris, casting from him the symbols of his rustic employment; and leaving the man to find his way out of the well-protected enclosure as he had found it in, he hastened to find his wife, studying as he went along how to break to her the unexpected tidings without startling her too violently.

He found her in her usual place, at her work-table, preparing for the arrival of the little stranger, who was to be welcomed as the greatest blessing Heaven could send, though the means of providing for him, and all other treasures of the same kind, threatened to be so very limited.

As Mr. Norris entered the room at one door, the factotum of the household, Giles Armstrong, the gardener, footman, valet, errand-man, and bailiff, entered at the other. Both came laden with news; but as the master hesitated a little in the delivery, and the man did not, this latter had the advantage, and had distinctly pronounced the words, “News is come to the village that old Mr. Roberts is dead,” before Mr. Norris had pronounced a syllable.

“Then, of course, we shall have to move directly, Frederick,”

said Mrs. Norris dropping her work, and turning very pale. "O dear Frederick, how sorry I am that we did not do it before! And my poor father will be sorry, too, that he prevented us."

"Go now, Giles, and shut the door," said his master; "I suppose that is all you have to say?"

"Except, sir," said Giles, scratching his head, "that Templeshaw, the clerk, says that we are to have a new master."

"I suppose so," said Mr. Norris quickly; "shut the door."

There was something so unusually grave in the manner of Mr. Norris, that his wife thought he was shocked, even more than herself, at the news they had just heard, and, rising from her chair, she went to him, and throwing her arms around his neck, exclaimed,—

"Do not let me see you cast down, dear Frederick. I can bear everything if you will but look like yourself. You are positively pale, my dear love! You never seemed to feel your disappointment so deeply before!"

"You are mistaken, Margaret," he replied, leading her to a sofa; "I have long been prepared to content myself in whatever situation it may please God to place me. But you have more news to hear, my love; Mr. Roberts's death was daily expected, but I have just heard of one in the very flower of youth and health who is also dead."

"For God's sake, who?" exclaimed his wife, trembling; "it is some one near and dear to us, Frederick, or you would not receive it thus."

"Not dear to us, Margaret. We must try to forget how little he deserved to be so. It is Mr. Wentworth who is dead, Margaret! and though we cannot lament, it is impossible not to be deeply shocked at his sudden exit."

Margaret stared at her husband for a moment, as if unable fully to comprehend words so astounding, and then exclaimed with very solemn earnestness,—

"Thank God! and may He, in his mercy, pardon him for all the suffering he has caused! Frederick! may I not go to Isabella?"

"Not if you intend to express your feelings to her with the same unreserve that you have done to me," replied Mr. Norris, half smiling. "You must indeed go to her directly, Margaret. She has sent for you; but, quite seriously, let me entreat you not to thank God again aloud for this appalling event."

"Only to you, Frederick, and to uncle David, perhaps. But fear me not. It is too solemn and too sudden a change not to be met soberly. There lies my shawl, Fred; give it to me, and give me your arm too, for I tremble like a frightened child; I

dread to see her, for what can I say? How shall I express myself? O Frederick! it is such a blessed, blessed change for her!"

"Upon my word, Margaret, this will never do," said Mr Norris gravely; "it is perfectly indecent to speak thus of an event so awful."

"Only to you, Frederick, only to you," replied his wife, arranging her bonnet and shawl, as quickly as her shaking hands would let her. "But will you not send for mamma?"

"Your father and mother are both sent for, Margaret; and if you are so very long, they will arrive before you."

"I almost wish they might, Fred," she replied; "for then I might see how they behaved, and do likewise. But, do you know, the fact is," she added, taking his arm and walking forward,—“the fact is, that Isabella is so true, so perfectly sincere herself, that I am sure she would not endure our canting about sorrow, when she must know that there is not, throughout the whole family, a heart that will not be overflowing with ecstasy at this news."

"You are incorrigible, I see," replied her husband, again tempted to smile, yet endeavouring to give his reprimand effect by speaking very gravely. "But if I do not greatly mistake, you will find Mrs. Wentworth, notwithstanding her sincerity, in a very different frame of mind. You had better mount this park stile, my love; the path seems a very pleasant one, and must lead to the house, I think, though I never ventured to follow it, by a way greatly shorter than that through the lodges. But I will not enter the grounds with you, Margaret. It would be like taking advantage of the very first moment at which his commands, poor man! cease to be of effect."

"And so I must toddle on as I can, alone—must I, Fred?"

"Yes, dear, you must, but I will stay here to watch till you are out of sight."

Had Mrs. Norris followed the example of Richard, and climbed over the fence which divided the gardens, three minutes might have sufficed to have taken her from her own house to that of her widowed sister; but having to cross the park, at one corner of which the mansion was situated, it took her, even by the short cut, at least half an hour; and during this time she did her best to bring herself into a state of mind befitting so melancholy a visit. But the difficulty of doing this seemed to increase at every step. The day was beautiful; every tree gave notice of its coming splendour; cowslips and violets seemed to spring up beneath her feet; groups of deer stood tamely still, enjoying the sweet air; the birds carolled from every bush, and not a single object greeted her that did not speak of peace and joy.

"Dearest Isabella!" she mentally exclaimed. "How dearly she once loved all sights, sounds, smells, such as these; and once again, by the blessing of God, she will enjoy them. She has not yet completed one-and-twenty years; and restored to health, peace, and tranquillity, why should she not again taste happiness?"

Well contented with such thoughts as these, Mrs. Norris, spite of all the conjugal reproofs she had received, walked gaily on, till the path, which though broad enough to keep her safe from the dew, was bordered by so magnificent a growth of fern, that she was more than half concealed by it, took a sudden dip towards the front of the stately mansion; whereupon, turning round, she waved an adieu to her husband, and in another moment stood upon the steps of the portico.

Here again her heart failed her, but solely from the fear of finding herself too happy; little time, however, was left her for meditation, for the bell was instantly answered, and she was led into the drawing-room.

Isabella was seated precisely on the spot where the knowledge of this astounding event first reached her. The letter which Mrs. Oldfield had picked up, in the hope that even as she did so, she might be able to catch some portion of the contents, lay on the table before her; and she had remained very nearly immovable, her hands clasped together and resting on her lap, with her eyes fixed upon it.

On seeing Mrs. Norris enter, she suddenly rose, as if to meet her; but she could not stand, and, stretching her arms out towards her sister, presenting as touching a picture of youth and loveliness sinking under the blighting influence of ill health, as ever eye looked upon.

Margaret had been greatly shocked on first seeing her after her return from the Isle of Wight; and in the few and fleeting interviews which had followed, was among those who drew the saddest auguries as to the ultimate effect of the unhappy life she led; yet, at this moment, she was almost as much startled at seeing how ill she looked, as if no such gloomy ideas had ever occurred to her.

In the silent embrace which followed, Mrs. Norris had no occasion to call to mind her husband's injunctions in order to check her hilarity; her heart sank within her as she held Isabella's emaciated hand, and marked the debility which every movement displayed.

"You are ill, my beloved Isabella!" she exclaimed; "surely you are greatly worse than when I saw you last. Why have you not let us know it? Why have you not sent for W——."

"Not worse, dear Margaret, not greatly worse than I have

long been," replied Isabella; "but not strong enough to receive that," pointing to the letter, "without feeling my weakness more than before. Read it, Margaret."

Mrs. Norris took the letter and read it through before she spoke again, while her sister sat gazing in her face, as if watching for the expression of the same stupefying horror that she had felt herself.

"Killed in a duel!" exclaimed Margaret, at length, with a shudder.

"Oh! is it not horrible?" cried Isabella, trembling from head to foot. "In the very height of health, and strength, and power! and by such a wretch! Poor, poor Wentworth!"

"You knew the man, Isabella? You knew the man who has killed him?"

"I did! and the remembrance of poor Marmaduke's conduct respecting him—the recollection of his noble, generous behaviour will never be effaced from my mind. You shall hear it all, Margaret, if I live to gain strength enough to tell it."

"You have not strength for that, or for any thing else, now, my Isabella!" replied her sister, shocked at feeling how violently she still trembled. "You must lie down, Isabella—you must compose yourself, dearest; this shock has been too much for you. Let me ring for your maid, and let us take you upstairs, my love."

"No, no; I do not want that; I shall be better presently. I am subject to this sort of weakness sometimes, Margaret. Do not mind it. I have sent for my father and mother, Margaret. I thought it right to do so; and I do so long to see them! I shall feel strong when papa takes me in his arms; it will seem as if I belonged to him again!" And then something like self-reproach, at expressing a thought so indicative of the pleasure his caresses would give her, struck upon her heart; and, with all the earnestness of fervent prayer, she exclaimed, "O God! forgive me!"

Margaret understood her perfectly; and could have spoke most eloquently on the good right she had to be thankful for being once more permitted to rest her head upon a parent's bosom; but this was not the moment for such wisdom, and she wisely contented herself with silently kissing her cheek, and saying,—

"I'm sure they will be here directly; there is no fear that they should delay, dearest."

And in effect, the wheels of the carriage were heard the moment after. Mrs. Norris listened to them joyfully; but every emotion was too much for Isabella, and she pressed the hand of Margaret, in which her own was clasped, with a sort of convulsive movement, that seemed more like fear than gladness.



In the next moment Mr. and Mrs. Worthington were in the room, and with agitation scarcely less violent than her own, alternately clasped her in their arms. The emotion caused by this was most salutary, for it was on her mother's bosom she first found the relief of tears.

The extreme paleness, and the evident weakness that marked every movement, suggested to her father and mother, as to Margaret, the necessity of procuring medical advice; but Isabella so earnestly besought them not to think of it, that they yielded; and then, taking the task of prescribing upon herself, Mrs. Worthington declared that she must positively go to bed. Neither father, mother, nor sister at first understood the meaning of the earnest pleading look with which this prescription was received; but it was made intelligible when she said, turning from her mother, whose arms were round her, to her father, who stood mournfully gazing at her altered face, from a little distance,—

“Here? must I remain here? Papa!—mother!—will you not take me home again?”

Her parents looked at each other, and the very perfect sympathy that usually existed between them failed not in the present instance; they understood each other perfectly. Both felt that every wish and whim of the delicate and greatly-agitated Isabella ought unhesitatingly to be complied with; and though both remembered that the luxurious mansion she prepared to abandon for their humble dwelling was now wholly and for ever her own, they were of one mind as to the probability that her former little bedroom at the rectory, with its snow-white dimity, would, in her present state, be more likely to induce healing slumbers than the silk draperies of her own magnificent chamber. It was, therefore, at the same instant, and as it were with one voice, that they replied,—

“Yes, dearest, yes!” “You shall come with us at once, my Isabella,” added her mother, “and the sooner we go the better. Henry! do not let the horses be taken off.”

Mr. Worthington left the room to comply with this injunction, and his wife, with Isabella almost in her arms, began to consult with Margaret concerning the arrangements that might most conduce to her comfort.

“You had better go to her dressing-room, Margaret, and ring for her maid, and tell her to put up all that will be necessary for a few days; if a further supply be wanted, we can send for it. And tell the woman to get ready herself, to follow us. Of course, dearest,” she added, addressing Isabella, “you will choose to have your own maid with you?”

Now the maid, who had taken the place of poor Wilson, had

been recommended by Mrs. Wentworth, and Isabella by no means desired her services ; so, once more pleading to have her way, like a child confident of indulgence, she said, "Dear mamma ! don't tell her to come. Let dear Hannah dress me, as she used to do. May she ?"

"She shall, my love, she shall," replied her mother. "But go, Margaret, and see that she has everything she can want put up for her."

Mrs. Norris repaired to the dressing-room, where once, and once only, she had enjoyed an hour of happy confidence with her sister, and as she had looked at the respective places they had occupied, she sighed at remembering how all the splendid hopes she had then conceived were melted away.

She wasted no time, however, in useless meditation, but rang the bell, which was immediately answered by Mrs. Thompson, the particularly elegant lady who, for the last ten or twelve months, had condescended to superintend Isabella's wardrobe and arrange her hair.

The woman looked surprised at seeing Mrs. Norris, whose person she knew from having seen her in the rector's pew at church, instead of her mistress, who she supposed had rung for her.

"What is your pleasure, ma'am ?" said the full-dressed Abigail, eyeing the cotton gown and straw bonnet of Margaret, with very little ceremony.

"My sister is going to Abbot's Preston for a few days," replied Mrs. Norris, "and I wish you to put up whatever will be necessary during that time."

"I suppose I am to go with her, ma'am ?" said Mrs. Thompson, interrogatively.

"No," replied Mrs. Norris ; "she desired me to say that she shall not want you."

"Not want me ? Is that my warning, ma'am ?"

"Not that I know of," replied Mrs. Norris quickly ; "Mrs. Wentworth said nothing about that. But make haste, if you please ; the carriage is ready."

"Very well, ma'am," said the woman, hastily leaving the room as if to execute her commands ; and Margaret, having cast one glance around at all the elegance poor Isabella seemed so anxious to leave, returned to the drawing-room, which she found her father had re-entered to announce that the carriage was at the door.

"Then, take me now, mamma !" said Isabella. "My head feels giddy, and I may not be so well presently. Let me go now, or perhaps I may never." She stopped ; the painful expression of her father's countenance struck her, and, instead of finishing

the sentence, she added, "I think I shall feel so much better at home!"

"Then, let the things follow us," said Mrs. Worthington, making a sign to her husband that he should ring the bell.

"Let Mrs. Wentworth's bonnet and cloak be brought here," she said, to the man who answered it.

This order was obeyed, but not, as might have been expected, by the lady's maid; the footman who received it, returned with the things on his arm. Their trembling owner was soon invested in them, and, without further delay, was placed between her father and mother in the carriage, and driven in silence to the quiet spot where she was born.

Margaret stood looking after the carriage for a moment, wondering at the change that seemed to have taken place in her feelings; for it was with eyes which plainly told she had been weeping that she rejoined her husband, and told him where it was that poor Isabella had sought shelter from the variety of conflicting feelings which overwhelmed her.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

On leaving Mrs. Norris in the dressing-room, the greatly-offended waiting-woman ran post haste to her friend and patroness, Mrs. Oldfield. "What's going to happen now, I wonder?" she began. "What d'ye think of our fine missis setting off before her husband has been laid in the earth, to go back to the place she came from?"

"What do you mean, Mary Thompson?" said the old woman, eagerly. "To be sure, missis is never gone home to her father's, is she?"

"Yes, but she is though—or if she is not gone, she is going; and, moreover, she does not please to take me with her. I suppose she thinks I am not fit for any such out-of-the-way place—and I can't say but she's right there. I suppose I shall have to look for a situation."

"If your news is true, Mary, it is the best I have heard this many a day. Never you mind about a situation, Mrs. Thompson. My own real mistress will recommend you again, I have no doubt, for you have behaved faithful and well in all respects. And you really think she's gone off, or is going, with the old parson and his wife. Capital news, I promise you. That speaks plain enough, or the deuce is in it. And what did they say about her not taking you?"

"Little enough—not a word, gentle or simple, but just that she did not want me."

The old woman took down her ink-horn and her writing paper, and set herself before her own particular little round table that stood before the window.

Had she ever read the "Critic," she would undoubtedly have exclaimed—

"All this shall to Lord Burleigh's ears!"

But as it was, she only smiled with the appearance of much inward satisfaction; and addressing the waiting-woman, who still stood pouting, she said,—

"Never fret yourself, Mary Thompson. Ladies don't send away one lady's maid till they have got another, unless they happen not to have money to keep them,—and that this is now the case with Mrs. Widow Wentworth, I would venture to bet everything I have got in the world—new mourning and all. But get along with ye, girl! I must write a letter by this day's post, though the lady will have to pay for it. She has got no more franking at her orders now—but I don't think she will begrudge this one, for all that. So leave me quiet, there's a good girl."

"Well, Mrs. Oldfield, you're mightily pleased, it seems, and nobody can tell for what," said the girl. "I see no profit in being turned out of one place before one has got another. But if she thinks of cheating me of my mourning, she shall smart for it. I have not been courted by a barrister's clerk for nothing. I know I can bring an action for slander and defamation, and damages, and all that; for it will be downright taking away my character, and nothing better;" and so saying, she flung out of the room, leaving the well-pleased Mrs. Oldfield to proceed with her despatch without interruption.

The old woman proved herself to have the pen of a ready writer by the rapidity with which she produced the following lines:—

"HONOURED MADAM,

"The heavy news brought by your letter has gone well nigh to break my heart; and little should I be able to look up again, was it not for the hope of being the messenger of comfort to you. It is to be hoped, madam, that you will marry again; and however my dear late master's will may be ordered, this I can say pretty surely, that you have no need to fret and frighten yourself concerning any settlement made upon the young woman, who I grieve we must call Mrs. Wentworth. But that won't matter much, provided she takes nothing from the estate; and nothing she will take, madam, you may rely. Everybody knows, indeed, that the marriage was huddled and hurried up, so that there could not have been time for much of a settlement, seeing how slow the lawyers are. But we have better reasons than that for thinking that what was never named to you, madam, never was done at all; and to explain this properly, I must tell you all that has happened here since the terrible post-bag arrived.

"First and foremost, this young Mrs. Wentworth seemed taken all by surprise

and at first I thought she looked very much as if she was out of her mind; but mind one thing, madam, she never shed a tear, nor seemed in any way what one may call sorry, no more than if her dog had died. Well, the first thing she does is to send off, post haste, one man one way and another man another, to fetch her father, mother, and our curate's wife, who, strange to say, to be sure is her own sister. And I can't but think this, considering how well she knew that he hated them all like poison,—for, dear honourable gentleman, he never took any pains to conceal his feelings,—considering this, I can't but say that I think her sending after them, one and all, in that way, was very indecent. However, of course that did not stop their coming; so in they bundled, one after another, looking very little better as to their dress than workhouse people, Thompson says. So, of course, madam, they were all shut up consulting together, and doubtless the old gentleman knew well enough how much and how little his daughter had to look to; and upon the whole, I can't say but what he acted honestly enough, considering the badness of his behaviour in letting them marry at all,—for the first thing he did was to send the curate's wife upstairs to speak to Mrs. Thompson, and, in short, to give her notice that Mrs. Wentworth the younger was no longer in a situation to require her services. Well, madam, the next thing made known to us was, that the old gentleman and his wife consented to take their daughter back again—and back she is gone, without saying a word about the plate, or the books, or indeed of any single valuable article of the many that my poor dear master so generously bestowed upon her. Now, as in all things about money I have always found that what's good for the goose is good for the gander, I can't but think that the old parson, who, they say, is no fool, would never have taken her back in that manner, if he did not know well enough that nothing was to be got by her staying. And what are all we servants to do, madam, if you don't come and take possession at once? If you'll please to believe me, that's the thing to be done, and the sooner the better. That nothing for a long time will be able to ease your grief, madam, is quite certain; but that there will be comfort and consolation in doing what is right and proper by what he has left behind is not to be doubted. In the hope of receiving by return your orders for getting your apartments ready,

“I remain, Madam,

“Your obedient humble Servant to command,

“OLDFIELD.”

This letter, notwithstanding her real sorrow, communicated a considerable degree of activity to the movements of Mrs. Wentworth, senior; for, after meditating upon the subject for a considerable time, she came to the same conclusion as the house-keeper, namely, that unless a will should be found, the young widow was probably left without any provision at all. The first and most obvious ground for her so thinking, was the act of removing her from the house within a few hours of the event being known; but she fancied herself not without other reasons for coming to this very desirable conclusion. She knew the character of her son to have been impetuous and self-willed to an extreme, and would not, as she repeatedly told herself, have wondered had he, in the fervour of his love for Isabella, and the equal fervour of his anger towards her for opposing it, settled half his estate upon her. Neither, on the other hand, would it have been at all surprising, according to her notions of his disposition, had he hurried on the marriage without any reference whatever to the future, and dying thus unexpectedly, left her without provision at all.

At any rate, both her interest and inclination led her to decide

upon adopting Mrs. Oldfield's hint, and going down to Oak Park immediately. Her confidential butler undertook to see all her orders respecting the removal of her son's body to what she never failed to call the seat of his ancestors, carefully obeyed; and with copious instructions to the necessary artists for sending after her all the lugubrious trappings and suits of woe which the occasion required, she left London for the splendid mansion that had once been hers, her arrival being announced only by a courier who preceded her but by a few hours.

Had Isabella's pecuniary situation been really as forlorn as her precious mother-in-law hoped to find it, her father would, beyond all doubt, have acted differently; but, as it was, knowing the magnificent settlement made upon her, which included, as he was well aware, not only the Oak Park mansion, but also every species of personal property that it should contain at the period of her husband's death, his care and anxiety were wholly directed to his daughter herself, there being greatly less danger of her not finding enough to inherit, than of her not living to take possession of it.

Nothing, however, could be more judicious than her removal to Abbot's Preston; had she remained at Oak Park, the very absence of all restraint and annoyance must perforce have acted as a perpetual remembrancer of the awful event which had happened, and which no degree of tranquillity could enable her to contemplate without strong and painful emotion. But at her father's house, peace and repose came to her clothed in no blood-stained garments, connected with no harassing recollections, and free from that involuntary self-reproach, which, however much uncalled for, would have been apt to blend itself, in such a mind as Isabella's, with every feeling that brought healing on its wings from its contrast to all that had gone before. But if, at the rectory, the first thought, as she opened her eyes, was that those she best loved were under the same roof with her, it seemed a blessing arising only from the locality, and her joy from it, by no construction, a guilty one.

Yet it must be owned that she, in some sort, yielded to the wilful waywardness of petted sickness; for though her mother and Margaret too (who failed not to reach the paternal mansion at a very early hour), declared it to be highly necessary for her health that she should remain perfectly quiet in her room, she insisted upon joining the family below at breakfast; not, indeed, by any very wordy demonstrations of choosing to have her own way, but by a gentle, insinuating gaining of point by point, till, at length, she had placed herself exactly in the seat she used to occupy between her mother and uncle David.

Yet in this there was neither the appearance nor the reality

of unfeelingly seeking for pleasure. But that she found something more than pleasure in it,—that she found, almost unconsciously, exactly that species of happiness which was calculated (if anything could do it) to heal the ravages which early sorrow had made in her constitution, is most certain. But it was found without being sought; for in her first anxious entreaty to leave her room, there was more of shrinking from herself, as she was at present, than of hope that she could ever live to feel enjoyment again, from returning to the full contentment of the past.

Mrs. Worthington had much dreaded the first interview between Colonel Seaton and the weak and faded girl he had so doted on. She knew the old man's feelings to be stronger than what are usually thought to remain in advanced age, and remembering that he had not once seen her during the last eventful year (for he had constantly and steadily refused to do so), she trembled lest his emotion at beholding her so greatly changed might betray itself in a manner greatly injurious to Isabella. But she found all her anticipations erroneous. When the tottering steps of the young widow first brought her beside the chair of the old man, he fixed one long earnest look upon her altered countenance, and it was not difficult to read in his, that he saw and mourned the change. But the voice in which he uttered, "Bless you! bless you, my child!" was anything but desponding; and when she seated herself in her old place next him, the action by which he extended his hand to her chair, as if to draw it still nearer, was as like as possible to that of former days.

Whatever feelings of a different nature might have been at work in their hearts, however, the decent, solemn gloom which her situation called for, appeared on every countenance; no allusion, indeed, was made to it, but she felt that it was not forgotten—she felt their sympathy in the horror that still shook her frame, and blanched her sickly cheek to a hue more pallid than it had worn before,—though, as yet, she did not and could not give herself to the delicious hope of future happiness, which struggled in all their bosoms with fears for her health.

But, though the finding herself amongst them all was decidedly the best remedy, both for her mind and body, that could have been applied, it proved somewhat stronger than her strength could bear; for, soon after the breakfast was removed, she herself proposed returning to her room, and was only saved from fainting by being laid upon her bed, and copiously supplied with pungent essences. By degrees, however, the painful fluttering at her heart subsided, and she sunk to sleep.

While Mrs. Norris, work in hand, prepared to sit beside her,

Mrs. Worthington returned to the breakfast-parlour, to consult with her husband on the propriety of sending to Taunton for Mr. ———, notwithstanding Isabella's earnest entreaties to the contrary.

On entering the room, however, she found that Mr. Worthington was gone out, and Colonel Seaton in possession of it alone.

"What do you think of our Isabella, uncle David?" she said, placing herself beside him. "Is she not changed, dreadfully changed, since you last saw her?"

"Never were the traces of great mental suffering more legibly written, than on that fair young brow," replied the old man. "It is a dismal sight, Margaret, a frightful sight!"

"God knows I feel it so, uncle David," she said, "and several times since I went to her yesterday, I have thought that the release is come too late. Should this be so, should we indeed lose her at the very moment that she seems restored to us again—oh, uncle David! surely it will break our hearts!"

"It will not happen, dear niece," answered Colonel Seaton cheerily. "The sufferings that a woman may endure from linking herself to a man whose temper she knows not have not been made more evident by the stamp of misery poor Isabella's face now wears, than it will be anon by the elastic rising of the spring, now that the fearful pressure is removed. At her age, a broken heart unites again, almost as easily as a broken leg, and if we none of us push her too fast, Margaret, we shall see her day by day gently emerging from the dismal pall that she now feels thrown about her, till she looks round upon us again with her own bright sunny eye, almost as she did before this hateful union took place; but," continued the old man, shaking his head, "not that she will ever quite lose that look of thoughtfulness. The very form of the young forehead is changed! But this matters not—she may perhaps but look the lovelier for it."

"Why, uncle David!" exclaimed Mrs. Worthington, with a look of happiness that showed how much authority she gave his words, "this poor man's death has made you young again! Never, from the hour that Isabella's marriage was arranged, have I seen you look so well as you do now."

"That may well be, Margaret; for never till now have I known an hour of peace. The idea of her sweet, happy, innocent spirit being crushed and tortured by such a one as I saw lurking in young Wentworth's eye, pursued me like a troubled, restless ghost. I never lay down to rest that I did not dream of her woful fate. I never woke without feeling the first heavy thought turn towards her: but it is over! Thank God! it is over."



"And now perhaps it is all for the best, is it not, uncle David?" said Mrs. Worthington. "You never would let Henry tell you anything about the settlements, but they are such as to render her the finest fortune in the county: everything is for the best, is it not?"

"No, niece Worthington, no!" replied the old man, sternly; "and if you live to see the marriage of a grand-daughter afoot, do not so reason. No wealth that all the mines of Golconda could pour forth would atone for that first blessed happy period of young joy, which God bestows on such hearts as Isabella bore in her innocent bosom before her wretched marriage. This can never come again, and nothing can atone for its destruction."

"Well!" replied Mrs. Worthington, less inclined to look back on what was past, than forward on what was to come, "at any rate, it is a great blessing that she is so soon released from it. If she does but recover her health, dear soul! I shall still think myself a happy mother. But I can't but be uneasy about her health, uncle David; she is so thin, and so very, very weak. What I came here for, was to look for Henry, to ask him if he did not think it would be best to send for good Doctor —, without waiting for Isabella's consent."

"Of course, my dear, you must ask your husband," replied Colonel Seaton; "and I hope he will think as I do, that *nothing* should be done without her consent."

"But you would think it right to send for him, if she did not object to it, would you not?"

"Yes, my dear—if you are quite sure that she has any other complaint than having been worried nearly to death during one-and-twenty months, and then startled out of her senses by this sudden change at the end of that time."

"I will go to her again," said Mrs. Worthington, thoughtfully; "perhaps I have frightened myself too much."

But when she again entered her daughter's room, and gazing on her as she still slept, saw the unmistakable indications of illness on her countenance, all her alarm returned, and she felt perfectly wretched at the idea of her remaining without advice.

"Margaret!" she said, in so cautious a whisper as not to endanger the slumber of the invalid, "will you, when she wakes, use all your influence to make her send for Mr. Richmond? How dreadfully ill she looks! But uncle David says he is quite sure she will recover, and this is a great comfort, for, somehow or other, he is always right. But I must leave you both for a couple of hours; your father is going to drive me to Appleton. They would think it so unkind if I did not go over with the

news, the blessed news, I cannot but call it. God grant her life and health to enjoy the change!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Mrs. Norris had not long watched the slumbers of her sister before she awoke; and looking almost wildly round her for a moment, seemed to recover with difficulty the perfect consciousness of her situation.

"Dearest Margaret!" she said, "how very kind it is of you to watch me thus. Have I slept long? I fear my head is very far from clear, I feel so strangely puzzled as to what I ought to do and feel."

"My dearest love!" replied her sister, "it is but too evident that you are far from well. Mamma thought herself obliged to go to Appleton, but she has charged me to obtain your consent to Mr. Richmond's being sent for. Why should you object to it, dearest Isabella?"

"I will tell you, Margaret," she replied, "if I can find words to make you understand me—but, indeed, this is not easy, for I think I hardly understand myself. The truth is, Margaret, that if Mr. Richmond be sent for to see me at this time, he will think—everybody will think—that this frightful news is killing me. But in my heart, Margaret, I know this is not so, and I cannot bear the falsehood."

Many people might have thought this exactly one of those idle excuses which should meet with no attention whatever; but Mrs. Norris understood her sister better, and without replying a word, she settled the business in her own mind, determined that for the present, at least, Isabella should be no further persecuted about medical advice.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

Yet seemed she not to wince, though shrewdly pained.

THE arrival of Mrs. Wentworth, senior, at Oak Park was very sincerely welcomed by the housekeeper, who, perfectly aware that whatever might be the future situation of Mrs. Wentworth, junior, she should never be invited to make one of her household, welcomed cordially the strong proof which this arrival gave, that her old mistress felt pretty confident her young one had no longer any right to rule there. That in both, the wish was father to the thought, cannot be doubted; but

before they had conversed together half an hour, each had very effectually convinced the other that Isabella's abdication was quite proof sufficient of her having no claim to retain a situation for which she was, as they agreed, so totally unfit.

After this satisfactory conversation was ended, Mrs. Wentworth's first care was to search in every place, probable and improbable, for a will. She had come down furnished with all the keys which her unfortunate son had with him in London; one or two of these opened repositories where there were many more; but none of these, though the places of security to which they belonged were easily found, led to the discovery she wished; so that after an hour or two thus uselessly employed, she came to the very correct conclusion, that there was certainly no will at all.

In fact, Mr. Wentworth, though a man of order in his affairs, and as little likely as any person that ever lived of deeming the disposition of his fortune a matter of little moment, had something about him of that feeling which made another proud man exclaim:—

There's such divinity doth hedge a king  
That treason can but peep at what it would:

and, in truth, at his age, with the most perfect health, and a mode of life that exposed him to fewer dangers than most men, it is not very extraordinary that having made a settlement which, in the very probable case of his having a child, disposed of his property to his entire satisfaction, he should at twenty-six not yet have made his will. The fatal quarrel to which he owed his death occurred in the forenoon, and was pushed on with so much brutal violence by his adversary, that it would have required either much less of the impetuosity of physical courage, or much more moral command of temper than he possessed, to have obtained for himself an interval of sufficient tranquillity to have supplied, in this respect, the loss of the years that were gone—and thus the last Marmaduke Wentworth expired without availing himself of the power accorded by the law, of giving one more absolute and imperious command after death.

The disappointment occasioned by this was great, indeed, to his mother. Of personal property she knew there was none, excepting the money, more or less, which he might have left in his banker's hands, and the furniture and stock, living and dead, of Oak Park.

While she remembered this, she remembered, also, that there *was* an heir-at-law, and she remembered, too, that he was in a station of life that would inevitably cause newspaper celebrity

to follow the inheritance, exposing her to the intolerable disgrace of having married the first cousin of a butcher!

The idea of the paragraphs, the hints, and innuendos, that would follow upon such a transmission of the noble property over which she had presided, chafed her proud spirit greatly more than her pecuniary disappointment; for, in truth, her income was a most sufficient one, and she would not have been sorry to give a hundred or two out of it, could she by so doing have sunk the name and claim of the butcher in eternal oblivion.

For this woe Mrs. Oldfield knew no remedy; and being quite aware that the little claim she hoped to establish for intended services could only be forwarded by proving that herself and her counsels were still productive of comfort and advantage, she wisely withdrew herself, leaving the vexed dowager to roam through the rooms, and cure her sorrow by nourishing her anger without any assistance from her.

Not long had she been thus employed, before the far-sounding bell of the principal entrance announced the arrival of a visitor. The idea that it might be some relative or agent of her daughter-in-law immediately suggested itself; and, knowing that if she had no settlement, she would have a claim upon one-third of all the magnificent "*plenishing*" over which she had just been throwing her regretful eyes, she thought it not improbable that this visitation might be for the purpose of affixing seals. She chanced to be in a drawing-room that opened into the library when the bell rang, and knowing that at such a time her privacy would be respected, let the business be what it might, she laid herself upon a sofa to rest her aching head, and meditate upon the question that now suggested itself, of whether she should return to town immediately, or remain till the funeral was over.

She had not occupied this position above two minutes, when she heard the library-door open, and persons in the act of speaking enter. As the door of communication between the two rooms was not quite closed, she was able, as they advanced up the room and spoke loud, to distinguish perfectly what was said. "I beg your pardon, ma'am," said a voice, which she recognized as that of one of the men servants. "But I must tell you, that be you who, or what you may, you can't bide here, now; so be pleased to go at once, or I must go for the housekeeper."

"Go for her, by all means," replied a female, in sharp shrill accents; "and depend upon it, I'll take care that neither you, nor she either, shall long interrupt my business in this room—which, for the future, I dare say, will be considered principally as my own."

Mrs. Wentworth instantly remembered that once before she had heard this same shrill voice, and nearly on the same spot; when the mad old maid, as she constantly called the erudite

Christina, before made an incursion into the library, and drove its owner nearly as mad as herself by her audacity.

Her intrusion at this moment was certainly not calculated to improve Mrs. Wentworth's opinion, either of her sanity, or the propriety of her demeanour; nevertheless, she thought it probable that she might, through her means, be able to discover how matters stood respecting the situation of Isabella, and thus be enabled to decide upon her own line of conduct, without the disagreeable necessity of having recourse to Mr. Worthington for information.

With this view she immediately quitted her recumbent position, walked rapidly across the drawing-room, and pushing the noiseless door open, stood before the astonished Christina, very much in the manner of an apparition from the world of shadows. Miss Clark, however, was not a person to be overset by anything immaterial, fully persuaded, as she was wont to say, that nothing of this nature existed superior in power to her own mind; and having coolly contemplated the lady's person for a moment, she turned to the servant and said—"There, now, my good fellow, you may be off. This old gentlewoman, if she chooses to stand there and watch me, may see that I steal nothing; and though I believe she is not reckoned over-wise, she must know, I dare say, that if I do carry off a book or two, there is no great harm in borrowing from my own niece—but most likely I shall take nothing: if it's as comfortable as my own nook, I shall most likely do all my reading here for the future."

Nearly the whole of this speech was uttered as she quietly employed herself in looking along the shelves for the volumes she wanted, without turning her eyes again towards either of the persons present.

Indignant, outraged, disgusted, as Mrs. Wentworth felt herself, she still kept her object in view, and waving her hand as a signal to the man that he might go, she waited till he had disappeared, and then, advancing to the side of Miss Christina, she addressed her with solemn stateliness, as follows:—"Give me leave, madam, to inquire who and what you can be, who, at such a period, can force your way into the house of mourning, in defiance of the very proper efforts of the domestics to keep you out of it?"

"You have forgotten me, have you, mem?" replied the spinster, turning her sharp black eyes upwards to peer into Mrs. Wentworth's face; "in that case, you are very right to inquire; for neither at this time, nor at any other, ought strangers be admitted into such a room as this. I shall take care myself, for the future, that nothing of the kind shall happen. However, you need not be uneasy now—my name is Christina Clark, and that

will suffice, as I take it, to enlighten your mind as to my right of coming here."

"Not the least in the world, I do assure you, madam," replied Mrs. Wentworth, with a look well calculated to produce effect upon any one armed less in proof than Miss Christina—"and I must request that you immediately retire."

"It is really vexatious," said Miss Christina, resuming her search "to see how women will persist in making their own excessive ignorance an excuse for the tyranny of man, in keeping them out of all honourable occupations—upon my word, Mrs. Wentworth, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, for not knowing, at your age, something more of the law of property than to fancy that you have any right to stand there, bullying me, merely because you were mother to the late owner of the mansion. Do, pray, stand away, if you please. The work I want is in this class," she continued, muttering; "at least, if the books have been arranged by my system, which is the only proper one."

It required a strong effort on the part of Mrs. Wentworth to continue any conversation with so very insolent a person; but the object she had in view was of sufficient importance to supply it, and seating herself in a chair at no great distance, she replied,—

"I am by no means disposed, Miss Clark, to enter with you into any discussion of my rights."

"God bless you, foolish woman!" squeaked Miss Clark, interrupting her, and turning sharply round; "you have no right at all. Shall I look about, and try to find some commentary on the law of settlement that may set your mind at rest?"

The word *settlement*, even from mad Miss Clark, was not heard without some slight emotion; but Mrs. Wentworth replied, without greatly changing countenance, "I will not trouble you, madam, as no settlement to which you can allude can, by possibility, be of any consequence to me. But perhaps, without referring to any volume on its shelves, you may be able to inform me if the late Mr. Wentworth settled his library upon you?"

"It would have been a monstrous wise thing if he had, Mrs. Wentworth," replied the spinster; "for I am sorry to say, that, notwithstanding all the advice and assistance I have been ready to give, I am the only woman of my family who can be considered capable of really profiting by such an acquisition. No; it is not settled upon me; but I know my niece well, Mrs. Wentworth, and though I have certainly not consulted her about coming here to day, I am not at all afraid of standing to the consequences of my intrusion; and, upon my word, I would not have come at all this morning, had I not been absolutely stopped for want of Muddleton's Essays."

Mrs. Wentworth felt somewhat at a loss how to frame her

next question ; though she might have been easily brought to believe that a settlement on Isabella existed, she would have scrupled on almost any authority less authentic than that of the document itself, to conceive it possible that Oak Park and its appurtenances could be hers. When she, with her fifty thousand pounds, bestowed herself upon its owner, neither her father, herself, nor any one else, ever dreamed of expecting such an appendage. Was it, then, credible, that her son should have bestowed it on a portionless girl, who might have deemed herself fortunate with a jointure of five hundred a year?

Little, however, as she loved or liked her daughter-in-law, she would far rather that so it should be, than that the odious butcher, bearing the very name that she had rendered elegant, should be seen by the county and the kingdom at large, to enter into possession, as nearest of kin, where she was so freshly remembered. But not even her wishes could lead her to believe this possible ; and after reflecting for a few moments, she decided that there was little or no chance of learning anything to be depended upon from the crack-brained little body who, unable to find the illustrious author she sought, had seized upon another, from which she was already preparing to take notes, and therefore determined to withdraw, saying as she left the room, "It is impossible, Miss Clark, that this intrusion can fail to be considered by every one as highly indecent ; but I am in no state to contest the point with you."

Having enjoyed the supreme pleasure of "taking possession," as she expressed herself to her greatly scandalized sister Lucy, on her return home, Miss Christina soon concluded her literary labours, informing the servant, however, whom she summoned to opened the house-door for her, that no one was to be permitted to touch the papers and volumes which she had left ready for her use on the morrow ; and then, having concluded her injunction with a friendly nod, she departed, cheering her spirits during her homeward walk by self-congratulations on the advantages of studying the laws sufficiently to know where one may go, and where one may not.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

Mrs. WENTWORTH, senior, was not an estimable woman, but very much the contrary ; yet it would be difficult to refuse her some degree of sympathy in the situation in which she was now placed. That she loved her son passionately ; that she was proud of him ; that all her brilliant hopes for the future rested upon him more than upon herself, is certain ; and though a fundamental hardness of character led her rather to battle with sorrow than yield to it, she unquestionably suffered greatly. Perhaps the first gleam of consolation that broke upon her grief arose from remembering that she was but forty-five years old ; and that having lost the being who had engrossed all her care, and formed the only object to which all her ambitious plots and plans were directed, she might now very reasonably determine for the future upon becoming the object of them herself. While meditating thus on the days that were to come, she could hardly fail to remember that there was great reason to believe this most lamented death would make her possessor of a fortune that rival nobles might struggle to obtain. The thought was not without some healing balm in it ; for though a tradesman's daughter, Mrs. Wentworth's ambition was not little : but now all these soothing hopes had wholly disappeared, and she was actually driven to desire, as a mitigation of her disappointment, that the obscure girl, whose alliance she had so bitterly deplored, might prove to be endowed with all the wealth she had so lately almost deemed her own.

So great was the indignation she felt at the culpable negligence which had left her thus bereaved, that she decided upon sparing herself the pain of remaining in the mansion-house, while the village-bell announced the arrival of the funeral *cortège*. "He thought not of me, Oldfield," said she to the favourite repository of her secret thoughts ; "and why should I stay and make my heart-strings crack by thinking upon him."

When she first formed this resolution, it was with the intention of escaping from the painful scene, without an hour's delay ; but a little reflection sufficed to show her that there was more of restless impetuosity than wisdom in this. That she should shun receiving the melancholy convoy which was expected to arrive the day after the morrow, could, she thought, create no surprise



in any one, but that she should visit the house, ransack all the most private repositories, and then depart without having expressed her wishes either to Mr. Norris or Mr. Worthington respecting the funeral, would tell too plainly the history of her mortification, and the lack of patience with which she bore it.

All these vacillations of purpose were freely communicated to her aged confidant, who privately sneered a little at an infirmity of purpose of which she would herself have been incapable; but, nevertheless, feeling that her best chance of profit still lay in making Mrs. Wentworth believe that all she cared for on earth was herself, she failed not to follow whichever way she led; and finally advised her, very earnestly, to write a note to Mr. Worthington without delay, requesting him to call on her. "And by this means, ma'am, you will not only appear to all the world in the right light about the funeral, and all that," observed the old woman shrewdly; "but, if you manage well, you'll be sure to come at the truth about the young madam—as to how she is left, where she is to live, and the rest of it."

"Right, quite right, Oldfield," replied her mistress; "that is what I will do. Bring me the pen and ink instantly—I will have nothing to say to the curate,—I do not wish to see him. Of course, you know that old Roberts is dead, Oldfield; and it is to be hoped that this Mr. Norris has no thoughts about the living, for poor Marmaduke was quite determined to give it to his tutor, and he will have it, too, if there be the least notion of honour in any of the people concerned."

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The note to Mr. Worthington was civil and stiff, and it received an answer pretty nearly in the same tone, which was speedily followed by the appearance of the worthy rector himself.

After the first salutation was got through, Mrs. Wentworth said:—

"I feel that I have taxed my strength too far, Mr. Worthington, in proposing to await here the arrival of the dear remains. I cannot do it, and shall leave Oak Park to-morrow, probably for ever. The body will arrive on Friday, and should, I think, be lodged in the great hall for one night. I would wish, too, that the hall should be illuminated—all preparations for its mournful decorations will be provided,—and that such of the tenantry as may wish to testify their respect to their late landlord, should be permitted to enter. Will you, sir, as being nearly connected with his widow, undertake to see that this be done?"

"Certainly, madam," was the satisfactory, though brief reply.

"Respecting a monument, you will perhaps permit me to correspond with you afterwards, unless, indeed, his widow should wish to take the execution of it upon herself?"

"In that, Mrs. Wentworth, I can, with perfect confidence, answer for my daughter, she would desire your wishes to decide. For the world she would not, I know, obtrude herself in any way that could jar against your feelings at such a time as this; but, should you resign the performance of this duty to her, I do not think you would find any reason to repent the confidence so placed in her liberality and good taste."

It is not likely that anything "more was meant than met the ear" in this sentence, but assuredly more was understood by it. All doubts as to the young widow's being amply provided for were completely removed; for such a pledge as her father now gave could hardly be redeemed by the amount of his entire income during three whole years. What this provision was, however, or how it arose,—whether from a rent, charged on the estate for her life, or from a bequest by will, of which Mr. Worthington might have been the keeper, she could only conjecture. But this was not a state for her irritable spirit long to endure; and though an averseness to confess that she had not, on this point, enjoyed her son's confidence, prevented any downright questioning on the subject, she determined to prolong the conversation till she had obtained from it the information she wished. Had she used less skill in the business, she might have been satisfied in half a moment; for neither from prudence nor from inclination would the rector have made the slightest difficulty in telling her exactly all she wished to know. But this sort of plain dealing, though it was his way, was not hers.

"Respecting the monument, then, we will decide hereafter," responded Mrs. Wentworth, in accent much more approaching to friendly than she had yet used; "and, indeed, I too feel certain that we shall not be inclined to dispute about it. But respecting the performance of the sad ceremony, Mr. Worthington? Perhaps it would be best that you should undertake it. There will, I fear, be something awkward in applying, just now, to Mr. Norris."

"Why so, madam?" said Mr. Worthington, simply.

"Because," she replied, "as he must consider himself as being already, in effect, dismissed from his situation as curate of Oakton, he may feel, and painfully perhaps, that its duties no longer demand his attention."

Mr. Worthington seemed to meditate on her words for a moment, and then said,—

"Curate of Oakton, he can certainly no longer feel himself;

although the ceremony of induction has not yet taken place, he knows himself to be the rector; but I see not why that should prevent his performing the ceremony."

"I really am sorry, sir, very sorry to say anything which may cause disappointment to any member of your family; but my late son's promise to Mr. Norris, made, as I am aware, before that gentleman's marriage with your daughter, was but conditional, and I regret to say that my son was very clearly of opinion that the annexed conditions were not fulfilled."

"I, too, Mrs. Wentworth, regret to remember that a person, whose last feelings appear to have been so exactly what they ought to be, should for any interval, however short, have permitted himself to feel resentment against such a man as Mr. Norris. But, surely, those around him have been greatly to blame in concealing from you what must have been calculated to give you all the consolation the melancholy circumstances permit; namely, that Mr. Wentworth, when aware that he could not survive, made a generous effort, almost with his last breath, to atone for the injustice into which some unfortunate misunderstanding had led him."

"Have the kindness to explain yourself, Mr. Worthington, for I do not at all know to what you allude," said the lady, with very unaffected curiosity.

Mr. Worthington made no reply, but taking honest Philip's letter from his pocket, gave it into her hand.

She read it with heightened colour and evident emotion, for which her kind-hearted companion felt more sympathy than she deserved from him, and again recurring to the real consolation that might be found in dwelling upon the desirable change of mind that had evidently taken place, he added,—

"To you, Mrs. Wentworth, this must be greatly more important than any consequences arising from the act itself."

"The act itself, sir, as you call it," she replied, somewhat haughtily, "can be of little importance to any one. You cannot be so little informed in matters of worldly business, as to suppose that words thus reported, and probably ill-understood, can convey property?"

"I know not exactly how that may be, madam," answered the rector, mildly; "but these words, so reported, are quite sufficient to give my daughter the pleasure of knowing what were Mr. Wentworth's last wishes on the subject."

"Mrs. Norris must be blessed with a very sanguine temper, sir, if she find them sufficient for the wishes we must presume her to have formed on this subject."

"It was of my daughter Wentworth I was speaking, ma'am, and not of Mrs. Norris," replied the rector.

"I beg your pardon, sir ; but we really do not seem to understand each other. You can have no wish, I am sure, to keep me in the dark about it, and I will therefore beg you to tell me at once if you are in possession of any will?"

"No, indeed, madam, I am not," he replied ; "if I had been, most certainly you would have known it ere this."

Mrs. Wentworth sighed at this extinction of her last hope ; but again recurring to the subject upon which she so naturally felt anxious, she said, "I must still, then, trouble you with more questions, Mr. Wentworth. If the words of my son, as reported by his valet, be not sufficient in law to dispose of the next presentation, why should Mrs. Wentworth attach any particular value to them?"

"They would have given her pleasure," replied Mr. Worthington, "if for no other reason than because they prove most satisfactorily that at that last solemn moment he felt towards Mr. Norris with the kindness of a Christian. But to a mind so sensitive as hers they will convey a conscientious satisfaction to her first act of power which it would not have without them."

"Her first act of power? Of what act do you speak, sir?" eagerly demanded the lady.

"The act of presentation to the living of Oakton," replied Mr. Worthington.

"Your daughter, sir? The widow of my son? Do you suppose that she has the power of presenting to the living?"

"Assuredly, madam. There can be no doubt of it."

"I certainly was not aware of it. You probably allude to the powers conferred by her settlement?" said Mrs. Wentworth, wishing to conceal the entire ignorance in which her angry son had thought proper to leave her on that subject.

"I do," concisely answered Mr. Worthington.

There was a settlement then. So much, at least, she had contrived to learn ; and little as she cared for the welfare of Isabella, she was certainly better pleased that the credit of the name she bore should be supported by a jointured widow, than by a butcher heir-at-law. Yet, still she was ignorant of much upon which her future conduct to the young widow would depend. Disappointed in the very natural hope of inheriting largely herself, she began to think that such a degree of intercourse as would look well in the eye of the world, with the widow of her son, would, if that widow were richly left, be the most advantageous course she could pursue. A moment brought all this home to her quick perception, and, with the first very amiable tone she ever bestowed upon the good rector, she said, "I am a most wretched lawyer, my dear

Mr. Worthington ; so much so, that my poor Marmaduke could never bear to talk to me on any subject connected with such technicalities. You will therefore do me a real kindness if you will explain to me, as shortly as possible, what settlement was made on your dear girl, and what her projects are for the future?"

"To your last question, madam, I can give no answer, no word in the least degree approaching the subject having been as yet uttered by any one. For her settlement, it is easily stated; it consists of all the property within the parish of Oakton, amounting, by the present rental, to five thousand three hundred and eighty pounds per annum, together with all personalities of every kind whatsoever in and about the manor-house of Oak Park."

"For her life, sir?" said Mrs. Wentworth, drawing a long deep breath, which was, however, more like gasping than sighing.

"No, madam, not for her life. The property is placed at her own disposal for ever."

"A noble jointure!" exclaimed Mrs. Wentworth, with feelings it would not be very easy to define.

"It is so," replied the rector; "it was too noble a provision for a young person without fortune; and so I told your son, Mrs. Wentworth, but his answer was,—'It is my pleasure, sir!' and to that I felt there was nothing to reply. This settlement, however, would have been more preposterous still, had not your son been young enough to calculate upon the probability of living as long as his wife, and of leaving a family when he died. Had their son lived, this property would have been my daughter's for her life only."

At this moment, memory brought with inexorable distinctness to the mind of Mrs. Wentworth the whole history of her projects and her hopes for the removal of this despised young woman, and her own restoration to unrivalled influence over her son; and for one short moment she felt the vanity of all human schemes as strongly as Napoleon could have done in the first hour of meditation on the rock of St. Helena. But it lasted no longer. A sort of desperate determination to begin again took its place; to be, at a distance, on the best possible terms with the nobly endowed young beauty, was one resolution; to make the best of her own good looks and her two thousand a year, was another; and to set off to Bath on the following morning, was the third.

"Many thanks to you, my dear sir," she said in accents of gentle melancholy sweetness. "I will not ask to intrude my presence on dear Isabella at this melancholy moment,—but tell

her I trust we shall meet again, and that she has my best wishes for her health and restored tranquillity."

Mr. Worthington, wisely thinking that it was impossible the interview could end in better style, now rose and prepared to take his leave; but Mrs. Wentworth, extending her hand, stopped him for a moment to say,—“I believe, dear sir, I ought to apologize to my daughter-in-law, for having thus unceremoniously taken possession of her house; but, of course, when I arrived, I knew not she was absent. May I depend upon your having the kindness to explain this?”

“Certainly, madam,” said the rector, bowing himself away, and heartily glad to escape from an interview in which he felt that he had not listened to a word of truth from beginning to end.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE weeks that immediately followed the interment of Mr. Wentworth were passed by his widow, not only in the most perfect seclusion, but with a restraint upon her words, and even upon her thoughts, so rigidly severe, that the happiest wife whom the sudden stroke of death ever bereaved of a beloved husband could hardly have exceeded it.

Yet was there no shadow of hypocrisy in this. Isabella had a sort of conscientious dread of feeling too happy that perfectly tormented her. It was now that she was first fully made acquainted with the noble liberality of the provision her unfortunate husband had secured her; for, much too giddy, and much too occupied by himself previously to her marriage, to give attention to anything so hateful as business, she only remembered her father's saying that “Wentworth's proposals were extremely generous;” but had no definite idea whatever as to the nature of them. The discovery of the thoughtful kindness that had secured to her all the luxuries which his love had bestowed, together with the recollection of the many excellent traits of character he had displayed where his constitutional infirmity did not interfere, made her feel that not to mourn his sad and untimely death would prove her the most heartless wretch that ever existed. Even the exquisite delight with which she took the steps necessary for the induction of the excellent Frederick Norris into the living was mixed in her tender conscience with remorse at the deep feeling of indignation she remembered to have experienced when her husband had told

her, some six months before, that it was impossible he should ever think of giving it to him.

"I never did him justice! He never did justice to himself," said Isabella, and she wept because she feared her own remorse at feeling happy.

Yet all her efforts were in vain; human nature must be human nature still, and peace will find a welcome in the heart, let it come in what shape it will. She slept, without fearing what the morrow would bring forth—she waked, without feeling her heart beat in apprehension of hearing her husband's bell, she listened to her mother, without wishing that she would speak in a whisper, lest Marmaduke might come and overhear something that should displease him—she heard her father's cheerful laugh, without blushing at the thought of what Marmaduke might think of it—she sat again beside her uncle David, as she had done during all the happy portion of her life, and, spite of all her struggles to prevent it, she looked forward to her brother Charles's return from Oxford with such a renewal of old feelings, and joy that had long seemed dead for ever and for ever within her, that she wept at that too, because the emotion was too delightful for one in her situation to feel.

Yet, spite of all these tears, her rest and appetite returned; her soft cheek by degrees began to recover its roundness and its delicate tint, and her limbs the elasticity they had lost.

Could any of the class (alas! too numerous) who, by giving unchecked way to selfish passion, pride, or obstinacy, destroy for those within the miserable circle of their influence the benefit of all Heaven's choicest gifts—could any such have seen Isabella as she was before her husband's death, and six short weeks after it, they would have received a lesson that might perhaps have been useful; for certain it is, that not one in a thousand amongst them have any notion of the terrible extent of their own fatal power. So much moral excellence is often joined with this fatal disease of mind, that could the obliquity of self-judgment which always attends it be remedied, much good would unquestionably be the result.

Though all the family, including the Oakton and Appleton members of it, watched the beloved Isabella closely, there was not one of them who so clearly comprehended the remarkable discrepancy between her appearance and her demeanour, as Colonel Seaton. To the rest it occasioned considerable uneasiness, and Mrs. Norris in particular, who thought that she knew her best, declared with tears to the assembled party, one night, when Isabella had retired early to bed, that she was quite sure her spirits would never, never recover from the effect of what she had endured.

"I am sure of this," said Margaret, "because I remember so well of old, that if a sorrow occurred, though no one perhaps felt it so keenly as Isabella, no one could throw it off so soon; and therefore," she added, "I am certain that her very nature is changed, and that she never will be herself again."

"Margaret is right, quite right," said the mother, sighing heavily; "yet, ought we not to be thankful for her improving health? Her life at least, dear creature, will be spared to us."

"Yes, that is a comfort, to be sure!" said the excellent Lucy; "but it is sad, too, to see that she never smiles without suddenly stopping, and then looking more grave than ever again."

"And no wonder either," sharply chimed in Miss Christina; "you have only got to remember the man she has had to live with always, and the woman she has had to plague her sometimes, in order to cease your wondering at her always being ready to cry. I believe, in my heart, she would have hanged herself long ago, had she inherited a little Clark spirit through my family; and perhaps, indeed, the example I set her, upon one or two occasions, might have helped her on a little; but it is too ridiculous to hear you all making a wonder of her being sad and sorrowful. You might just as well wonder at my being studious. When one gets thoroughly into a habit, it is not easy to get out of it."

"Something better still than the Clark spirit would have kept our Isabella from hanging herself, I hope," said Mr. Worthington; "but I fear you are right as to the hopelessness of ever again seeing her gay and happy. The fountain of joy seems dried up within her; and I doubt if there be any second spring of that kind in our nature. You smile, uncle David? It must be at my metaphor then, for you would hardly smile at Isabella's altered condition. A more melancholy theme than that, I think, can hardly be hit upon."

But, notwithstanding this reproof, uncle David smiled again.

"Not at your metaphor—I smile not at your metaphor, Henry," said the old man; "it is a pretty one, and, better still, it serves well to express what you mean. But, the fact is, I have the great happiness of believing you all wrong. Isabella's heart is not broken. The fountain of joy is not dried up. Though at this moment, I verily believe, so tender is her innocent conscience, that she would rather anticipate being unhappy to the end of her life, than fancy that she could ever rejoice at the blessed release from suffering that God has granted her. And, if I mistake not greatly, it is the very excess of her happiness that generates this fear. Depend upon it, we none of us know how much she has suffered, but we may guess it from the withering condition of her frame when she returned to us; and



the removal of the heavy chains that bound her produces a degree of happiness to which she dare not yield herself, lest her conscience reproach her with ingratitude towards the unhappy man who had no fault on earth but his miserable temper and his self-blown pride, and who assuredly proved himself no niggard in the provision made for her."

"God grant you may be right, uncle David!" exclaimed Margaret; "and I do think that it is possible, for I can understand how the idea of rejoicing at Mr. Wentworth's untimely death may be repugnant to her. But how is this to be met? What ought we to do in order to prove to her that she may be happy again, without being thereby guilty of any sin?"

"Just do nothing, Margaret," replied the old man. "Leave her wholly and solely to that nursing mother, Nature. When she has fair play, you may see how well and steadily she works. If the poet's elegant thought were true, and that poor Isabella's 'body thought,' as well as her mind, you would not see her, day by day, recovering her health and beauty, as you do now. But as her real genuine feelings are all healthfully delightful, their effect is real too, whereas her pretty efforts not to enjoy too keenly, cannot deceive dame Nature, however much they may puzzle us. But let her alone, let her alone. It is very possible that she may never be so thoughtlessly merry again; but she will not be the less happy for that."

Uncle David's opinion upon all subjects on which he could be induced to speak them, was ever listened to, not only with respect, but often with an almost superstitious feeling of confidence that he was right; and all he said now was too agreeable not to be received with a very confiding welcome; and they agreed implicitly to follow his advice, as to leaving her mind to recover its tone without remonstrance or interference of any kind.

Fortunately it was impossible to step into such a property as that she had unexpectedly become possessed of, without the necessity of attending to business of various kinds, and the good sense of her father prevented his sparing her all the trouble he might, from believing that any exertion which she felt it her duty to make, would be entered upon willingly, and prove more salutary than any amusement in which she could be brought to engage.

The great difficulty was, to make her feel the necessity of returning to inhabit her own house; it was evident, though she never canvassed the subject, that she looked upon this as a measure that must ultimately take place; because, when the servants, after very liberal treatment as to mourning and presents, offered to remain in their several places, she retained

many, while she dismissed a few; and when the housekeeper, lady's-maid, and butler took their departure, she expressed a hope that their places might be supplied without sending for London servants. Yet still, no allusion could be made to her exchanging the little dimity-room at the Rectory for the blue silk apartment at the Park, without producing such an evident shrinking from the subject as to make it nearly impossible to pursue it.

This feeling seemed to continue with so little appearance of becoming less, that even uncle David was at length brought to confess, that as, according to the fitness of things, it was desirable that the owner of the Oakton estate should reside at Oak Park, and not at the Rectory of Abbot's Preston, it might be as well to do or say something that might lead to its coming to pass.

"Nevertheless, it is not easy," observed the old man; "for, in this case, we can make use of no ordinary topics of persuasion. The more perfectly we could convince her that she would find great enjoyment there, the more she would fear to take possession. Nay, to tell you the truth, the very circumstance of her appearing so averse to establishing herself amidst all the luxuries of her own home, leads me to think that she knows she should enjoy it exceedingly. Dear good little soul! she must be, if possible, beguiled into thinking that it is her duty."

"And so it is, in fact," replied her father; "but how can we set about making her understand it? It is not very easy to tell the dear creature whose presence, even in her state of sadness, has been the only enjoyment we have any of us tasted since she left us—it is not easy to tell her that we have all set our hearts upon her speedy departure, and that so very earnestly, that it is her bounden duty to comply."

"It would not answer, if you did it, Henry," replied Colonel Seaton, "for she would only shake her head, and smile in perfect incredulity. No, you must talk to her about the poor people, and the great advantage it will be to them to have a family living at the mansion-house."

"Family! Oh, there's the rub," observed Mr. Worthington. "I dread for her the solitary stateliness of that great house. If Miss Christina could but obtain a seat in Parliament, I should recommend Lucy to go and live with her."

"That might do tolerably well; but as it may be some time before her election takes place, I think we must look about for something else. Don't you think, Henry, if you were to examine the premises closely, that you might find out some very great improvements which might be made in the Parsonage at Oakton?"

"There would be no difficulty in that, I assure you. Frederic has made the very best of it; yet, after all, it is, I am sorry to say, but a miserable house."

"I rejoice heartily to hear it," replied Colonel Seaton. "Make this evident to the little patroness of the living, and see if most of your doubts and difficulties about her future happiness, and the supporting properly the situation in which she is placed, do not vanish at once. For where in the world, I would beg to know, can poor Margaret and her husband, and the babe that is daily expected, I believe,—where can they all find shelter, while the necessary repairs and alterations are going on, unless it should fortunately occur to Isabella that she might, perhaps, be able to find room for them in her house?"

"I give you honour, uncle David!" exclaimed Mr. Worthington, rubbing his hands with great glee. "This will do. I have no doubt whatever of it; but to make it quite effectual, nobody but ourselves must be aware that it is a plot."

This was agreed to by the venerable projector, whose eye seemed to sparkle with renovated youth, as he meditated on the probable success of his scheme.

"Isabella," said her father, on the following morning, "if the weather be not too warm to-day, I wish you would send over for the carriage, and drive your mother to Oakton. I wonder we heard nothing of them all day yesterday."

"That is, at least, a proof that there is nothing the matter with Margaret," observed Mrs. Worthington; "for if there were, depend upon it, we should have seen Frederic. However, I should like the expedition very much."

"And so shall I, mamma," said Isabella; "if papa will ring the bell, we will send off for the carriage directly."

It may be observed here, that Philip, Mr. Wentworth's late valet, was the only servant whose attendance Isabella had permitted since she had been in her father's house. Mr. Wentworth, like many others, showed infinitely less of his unhappy temper to his servants than he had done either to his mother or to his wife. This peculiarity, which all who have fallen in with such characters must have observed, arises probably from various causes. The most obvious appears to arise from the fact, that no servant is obliged to endure the humours of a master, nor ever will do so when they prove to be more than an equivalent to the advantages his service may offer; and doubtless, it is the same train of reasoning, perhaps unconsciously pursued and acted upon, which invariably makes the wife, however well beloved, the principal victim; for it is she only who can never escape. Father, mother, brothers, sisters, nay, even children, if the torment become intolerable, find resolution to struggle for,

and pitying friends to aid in, the separation necessary to their tranquillity. But if a wife tries this, she is disgraced—may be, robbed of her children, if she have any, and can be but scantily and cautiously supported by her friends, let her conduct have been ever so blameless.

But to return to Philip. Though he could hardly be said to regret his master, for he felt at the very bottom of his honest heart the blessing which his death must prove eventually to his faultless wife, he respected his memory, and was grateful for the liberal treatment with which his services had for many years been repaid. Isabella was in a great degree aware of this, and it was for this reason that she liked to have him near her. Another illustration of the feelings which seemed called upon, as it were, by herself, to struggle in her mind against the intoxicating change from slavery to unbounded independence, from reprimands and reproaches as regular in their recurrence as the appearance of her daily meals, to one unvarying tone of partial love from all around, and from a wearing worry that ceased not, to a tranquillity as perfect as that of her own sweet nature: another illustration of these feelings might be found in her having declined the offered services of her favourite Wilson, who, with Mrs. Norris's full permission and approval, desired to give up her place with her, to resume that which she had been so unjustly deprived of at the Park. Isabella felt all the justness of her claim, and, moreover, knew that she could never find an attendant that she should like so well, yet she refused to receive her—it would have been too like triumphing in the power she had gained by his death; but, having mournfully shaken her head, and pronounced, "No, Wilson, no, it cannot be!" she bent forward and kissed the cheek of the disappointed girl, which not only healed the wound she had inflicted, but put her considerably more *au fait* of the feelings which produced the refusal, than the most elaborate explanation could have done.

But while dwelling on the character of Isabella, we are forgetting her story. Philip received his orders; the carriage arrived; and Mrs. Worthington and Isabella got into it.

"Will you take me on the box, Isabella?" said her father suddenly, as if the thought had just struck him.

"Dearest papa! do you like that best? We can make room for you inside." But Mr. Worthington was on the box beside the coachman, almost before she had finished speaking, turning round to give her a smiling answer through the window, that recalled to her, with a strange mixture of pleasure and pain, the only time that he had ever made use of her carriage before.

On reaching Oakton, they found Margaret far from well,

though not ill enough to justify, as she thought, her alarming the family by sending for her mother; but it was evident she was very particularly rejoiced to see her; and the three ladies sat down together, as ladies do under such circumstances, finding marvellous consolation from the mere act of discussing their hopes and their fears.

Meanwhile, Mr. Worthington made some excellent excuse for leading his son-in-law into his garden and round his house, and about and about, till, in the most natural manner in the world, he found means to convince him that the premises were in a very dangerous state of disrepair, and that attention must instantly be paid to a certain portion of the roof, and a certain portion of the wall, and Heaven knows what besides, till returning to the parlour and communicating the alarm—though Mr. Norris would rather have run the risk of letting things remain for a few weeks longer—appeared decidedly the wisest thing that could be done.

"It is a monstrous lucky chance that brought me over here to-day," said Mr. Worthington, as he entered. "Don't be frightened, Margaret, but if care be not immediately taken to prevent it, the north side of your house will infallibly fall."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed the three ladies at once.

"Oh! it must be propped by stout timbers on the outside," said Mr. Worthington, "and it is possible that the crash may be prevented till poor Margaret gets up again; for dogdays though it be, it would not be particularly desirable to have her dwelling laid open to the north while she is confined."

"Let her come to us," said Mrs. Worthington, eagerly.

"No, mamma!" said Isabella, rising, and speaking, for the first time since her widowhood, with a tone approaching to independence. "Margaret must come to me. Remember the extreme convenience the vicinity will give for bringing everything she may wish for. Mr. Norris will have the kindness to permit an opening being made directly from his garden into the shrubbery, through which books and linen, and whatever we think necessary to be removed, can be carried into my house in a moment." (This was the first time Isabella had ever been heard to call it "my house.") "Come with me, papa, will you," she continued, with a degree of animation long a stranger to her manner, "and everything shall be ready for the whole family within an hour. You will stay here, mamma, and help Mary Wilson to get all her things put together, and the carriage shall wait to bring you round. Papa and I can contrive to make our way through the fence, I dare say; it will save half an hour at least. How thankful I am that we happened to come to-day! Don't let her exert herself too much, mamma;" and giving her sister a

hasty kiss, she hurried out of the room, without waiting for an answer.

"I will take the old man's word for a thousand pounds," thought Mr. Worthington, as he followed her into the garden. "Let her have her own way, Norris," he whispered to his son-in-law, who accompanied him. "This exertion will do her incalculable good!"

"God grant it!" replied Norris, while tears started to his eyes. "The idea of being useful to Margaret seems to have recalled her to life and animation. Dear, kind Isabella! How must she have suffered while forced to keep us at arm's length as she has done!"

"No more of that, Fred, if you love her," replied the happy father in a low voice, and then, hastening to overtake the hasty step of Isabella, he said—

"Stop a moment, dear child. There is Giles round yonder, let us call him and his axe, and he will make way for us in a moment."

The man was summoned, and with two or three strokes of his stout arm an opening was made, which, though the sight of it made Isabella's heart leap with pleasure, it would have cost her many a remorseful struggle to have ordered in a common way. But now that Margaret's safety, perhaps her life, depended upon removing all obstacles to the power of passing rapidly from one house to the other, it was an act that could not admit of a single moment's doubt or delay.

Great was the astonishment of the diminished household at Oak Park, at seeing their mistress enter its doors for the first time since she had left them on receiving the news of her husband's death; and hardly giving herself time to explain the urgency of the case, actively lending her personal assistance to the opening of windows and the minute examination of the rooms she intended for her sister's use. In the midst of this occupation, however, she stopped short, and taking her father aside, said to him, in no very steady voice, "Do you think, papa, that Margaret would dislike to use the rooms I used to occupy? If not, I would take these, I should like it better."

Mr. Worthington understood her feelings in a moment; and perceiving that this arrangement would remove an obstacle of perhaps no trifling importance, in her estimation, to her returning to her real home, he said gravely, and without affecting to misunderstand her, "You are very right, Isabella. This is natural feeling, and wisdom too. Let these pretty rooms that open to the south be yours for the future, dearest; and let me convert a bit of that ample lawn into a flower-garden to bloom beneath

your windows. You used to think I had some skill in that line, will you trust me with such an office?"

She pressed his hand in very eloquent silence, and he felt that another point was gained, and that she might soon be brought to amuse herself with alterations and improvements, for which the cold, stiff stateliness of the grounds immediately round the house offered sufficient opportunity.

A house under the circumstances of Oak Park, with plenty of servants exceedingly desirous of retaining their places, does not take long, especially in the month of July, to get ready for the reception of a family; and long before Mrs. Worthington and Margaret, with her packages, arrived in the carriage, the advanced party were ready to receive them.

Delighted to see her sister restored to so much of her former animation, Mrs. Norris made no resistance to this sudden removal, though she certainly did hint to her mother that she doubted if it were necessary.

"Whether it be or not, Margaret," replied Mrs. Worthington, "two things are certain, and either would be sufficient, I think, to reconcile you to this sudden change of abode. The first is, the miserable anxiety we should all be in, after the idea of danger was once suggested, if you remained there during your confinement; and the other may be found in the obvious advantage of the excitement and exertion to Isabella."

"I am more than reconciled, I am delighted at it," replied Margaret. "Dearest Isabella!" she continued, "it is, indeed, delightful to see her come back again, as it were, to her sweet self—forgetting sorrow, sickness, and everything else, the moment she thinks she can be useful."

But notwithstanding the perfect resignation of Mrs. Norris to her sudden change of quarters, the bustle probably somewhat hastened her hour of trial, for she was the mother of a little girl before midnight.

No young mother awakens from her first sleep, after such an event, without feeling for the moment almost astounded at the change that has come over her; but much stronger was this sensation in Mrs. Norris, who not only opened her eyes for the first time upon a treasure that seemed greater to her in value than all that the universe had ever before contained, but she saw it and herself surrounded with objects very nearly as unwonted, as if the whole business were the work of enchantment. In these first hours of maternity, everything—if happily the health of both the parties so deliciously introduced to each other be good—everything appears *couleur de rose*; and though I do not mean to assert that the blue silk hangings of Margaret's bed looked like pink to her eyes, it is certain that the unexpected

splendour amidst which her infancy was born amused her fancy, and in no degree lessened her happiness.

As to Isabella, she seemed to have entered upon a new state of being. Her warm heart poured out its long arrears of affection upon Margaret with a fulness of contentment that she had never expected to feel again. Nor could any arrangement of circumstances have been possibly devised which could so safely have permitted her indulging these feelings, untormented by the bugbear which had hitherto haunted her in the shape of terror lest she should find herself rejoicing at her husband's death. For would not Margaret's safety—would not the health and vigour of her precious babe, have been cause of joy under any circumstances? And if she did feel delight unspeakable in ministering to her comforts and in seeing her surrounded by all the ingenious devices which wealth invents to turn the room of an invalid into a palace of luxury, her heart did not reproach her for it, and she permitted herself to be happy without remorse.

Meanwhile it cannot be denied that Colonel Seaton enjoyed a very considerable degree of triumph, from the agreeable accounts brought him by all parties respecting the two sisters. "Though I served a good many years in the army, Henry," said he to his nephew when they found themselves alone, "this is the first time I have acted as general, and I must say that I think their Majesties (I have served them) had a great loss from not having tried my talents in that line."

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

It was not long before the veteran gave another proof of his intimate knowledge of Isabella's heart. "Henry," said he, when his great-grand niece was ten days old, "I want you to borrow Isabella's carriage for me. I should have been sadly put to it to find an excuse for entering the house I have so sturdily avoided, had not this happy-starred little one come to help me. Isabella would have trembled and turned pale from some fanciful notion that I was making holiday for joy that her tyrant was removed. But I may want to see this new little Norris, you know, without the slightest affront to the memory of the late magnificent Mar-maduke. Will you undertake to communicate this wish to her?"

"Yes; and it shall be done skilfully," replied Mr. Worthington. "I begin to understand her as well as you do; and, between us, I think we shall contrive to manœuvre her into a very comfortable degree of happiness."



Notwithstanding the message was given, however, with a very proper degree of emphasis on uncle David's wish to see his great-grand niece, Isabella did not receive it without emotion. She remembered, and for a few moments very painfully, all she had suffered from not seeing that dear uncle there before; but her father stood before her, awaiting her commands about the carriage, and, shocked at perceiving this, she threw her arms about him, exclaiming, "Forgive me, dear papa! but is it a question whether I shall be glad to see uncle David here? Oh, papa! you both of you know how to answer it."

There was, perhaps, some little feeling of embarrassment on both sides, when Colonel Seaton for the first time greeted her in her own noble mansion. The reason why he had never done so before could not be quite forgotten by either. But if the embarrassment was mutual, so was the pleasure also; and though tears were in the eyes of Isabella, as the old man pressed her to his heart, she had, perhaps, never found it more difficult to avoid blessing her freedom than at that moment.

The first visit of Miss Christina was considerably less touching; but it might not, perhaps, have been without its use as an antidote, for on this occasion, instead of being overwhelmed by the happiness of freely receiving those she loved, Mrs. Wentworth had to make some effort before the feeling was conquered which tempted her to say that she would never receive her at all. The history of her incursion into the library before Mr. Wentworth had been dead a week, had found its way to her; and his mother could scarcely have felt more indignant at it than did his widow. Luckily for Miss Christina, however, the gentle, kind-hearted Lucy followed her into the room; and the sight of the timid look of happiness which her features wore, seeming to ask forgiveness for the pleasure that sparkled in her eyes, might have sufficed to quench every harsh feeling in a sterner spirit than Isabella's. Neither the care of the nursery, however, nor the happiness of feeling herself surrounded by her family, constituted the only sources which contributed to render Colonel Seaton's device successful. Though, perhaps, neither more nor less aware of the advantages which wealth brings than the generality of her fellow-creatures, Isabella had not yet learned to avail herself of them without something like repugnance, lest any feeling approaching to ostentation might seem to be the result of it; but, as patroness of the living, it was her duty to take care that a gentlemanlike and perfectly comfortable residence should be attached to it; and, as the sister of Margaret, it became her greatest delight to plan, and give orders for the erection of the very prettiest mansion that ever was built for the purpose. Before Mrs. Norris was permitted to leave

the house and walk out to that part of the shrubbery which, long ere she reached it, had been made to communicate by a wicket with her own flower-garden, the rickety old Parsonage had been levelled to the ground, and the foundations of the new one sufficiently traced to permit her judging, in some degree, of the contrast to it that would be offered by that about to be erected.

From that time there was no danger of Isabella's relapsing either into bad health or bad spirits; every day was marked by the progress of this work of love, and she might be seen from early morn till dewy eve, with no other protection than her parasol, standing in Mr. Norris's garden, now fixing the site of a greenhouse, now eagerly watching the progress of the walls, and now suggesting to the young rector various improvements for his garden, for which a slice of her own shrubberies on one side, and a few acres of pasture from the park on another, certainly offered great facilities.

It was in the midst of this recovered happiness, that Charles Worthington made his first appearance at home in the character of an Oxonian; and happy was it for him, and perhaps for all parties, that he did not see his widowed sister during the period when the sudden change in her circumstances had made her appear sometimes like one stunned and incapable of feeling anything, and at others, trembling with all the nervousness of guilt, at discovering that the event which decency and gratitude should have made her deplore, was, in fact, the source of renovated health and returning happiness.

Had Charles seen her thus, interpreting the symptoms, perhaps, with less acuteness than his venerable uncle had done, he would have felt all the burning indignation he had conceived against her unfortunate husband revive; and so certainly would his ardent nature have betrayed what he felt, that very painful remonstrances would have been sure to follow. But now his coming seemed to add the only charm wanting to complete the happiness of her existence; and shunning with something a little like superstitious care all allusion to guitars and serenades, she ventured to indulge herself almost as freely as in days of yore, in listening to his stories, laughing at his fun, and in being his best, as she ever was his dearest, listener.

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Thus passed the summer, autumn, winter, till the spring came round again, and displayed the parsonage house ready for its finishing, when the weather should be dry enough to venture upon the ornamental labours of painting and papering.

The Norrises and their pretty baby still made part of the

Oak Park family; and Isabella was still happy, because still occupied with them, and still actively employed in preparing for their future comfort. Their country friends and neighbours, too, from the noble owner of Lymcote Castle to the unassuming spinster daughters of a former curate in the village, had all by this time discovered that Oak Park was no longer guarded by dragons, either male or female; and that instead of being, as formerly, the gloomy retreat of pride, it had become a very model of unostentatious elegance and friendly hospitality. But the time was now fast approaching when the happy-minded Frederic and his charming wife must take possession of their own mansion. The summer had again worn away; every room, with its quiet but elegant furniture, seemed to ask for an inhabitant; Isabella had indulged herself to the very utmost stretch of her fancy in adding comfort upon comfort, till it seemed cruel to keep the active notable Margaret from entering upon the enjoyment of it; yet still Isabella declared that it could not yet be quite finished—it could not yet be quite aired—and, in short, continued to delay their departure till Mr. Norris, feeling that the movement must be made, promised, without consulting Isabella, that he would give a harvest-home supper to his labourers in the new rectory kitchen, when the haymaking of his glebe should be completed. After this arrangement was made, it was communicated to Isabella; and, perfect as her health had now become, she turned pale on hearing it. The idea of losing her dear companions, close as their mansion was, had something terrible in it; and for a moment she closed her eyes, and fancied herself alone, amidst a dozen servants, in that vast house, which could not fail, when no longer cheered by the society she had so vividly enjoyed, to bring before her all the misery she had suffered there. But she felt this was a selfish sorrow, and she shook it from her, resolutely determined not to destroy the happiness she had so earnestly studied to promote, by making Margaret and her husband feel that, in order to repay her kindness, they must determine never to enjoy it.

Thus strengthened, she bore the melancholy business of seeing her beloved guests dislodged, better than any one expected, and no one guessed that she spent half the night that preceded it in tears. They dined together for the last time as one family; and when the baby's bedtime approached, "the flitting" took place in the most primitive manner possible, Norris offering his arm to his wife and her sister, the nursemaid bearing the child, Mary Wilson the pap-dish, and Giles following after with the cradle on his shoulders. But ere they had proceeded a dozen steps, Isabella desired to change the line of march; perhaps she a little doubted her power to converse as they went. "Let me

carry the baby," she said; "she will not be so nearly my own much longer."

Arrived in the garden, its improved beauty, its exquisite neatness, the elegant aspect of the beautiful little mansion, the tea-table spread in the cool verandah, all presented the idea of a home so every way delightful, that Isabella's heart smote her for wishing to keep them from it.

"God bless you, dearest, dearest Margaret," she said, placing the child in her arms. "Spite of all our care, you will still have to turn about and about, before you will feel yourself settled; just like your cat here, that Wilson is so carefully conveying under her shawl. God bless you both; God bless you all! I will not stay now; but you shall come and call for me to-morrow, and we will examine into all the contrivances of the nursery when it is inhabited, and see how they answer."

All this was uttered in a voice that was intended to be cheerful; but when the last good night should have been uttered, tears came instead to the eyes of both sisters; and Mr. Norris wisely took Isabella's arm, leading her off into a part of his newly-made garden, for the purpose of showing her something that flourished particularly there, and also of pouring out, in a few energetic words, the gratitude he felt for all her kindness.

"And how am I to thank you, dearest Frederic," said she, "for all you have been to me? We must not talk of gratitude; for if we do, mine will, or ought, so completely to overpower yours, that I shall not hear a word you say. But come, dear friend, you shall open the dear wicket for me, to which I look for most of my future happiness, and then go back to Margaret."

Mr. Norris knew it must be done; so leading her in silence to the little gate, he kissed her hand and left her.

Among the thousand and one proofs of thoughtful kindness which Isabella had placed in and about the Parsonage, was a low double-bodied phaëton, which, by the help of a pair of very beautiful ponies now standing ready in the new stalls prepared for them, was intended to convey the new rector and his family, whenever they might chance to prefer it to the using her carriage. To put these pretty ponies on their mettle seemed to be Mr. Norris's first object on taking possession of his premises; for after saying a word in passing to his wife, he summoned Giles to the stable, where they contrived between them, without the slightest loss of time, to harness them to the carriage, and then set off with them by a cross-road, now perfectly macadamized by harvest carts, as fast as they could conveniently go.

Within twenty minutes, however, he gave them breath before

the door of the Misses Clark, at Appleton; and calling to the juvenile factotum, who happened this time to be engaged too near the gate to escape, he left his panting coursers in his charge, and made his way without ceremony to the spinsters' parlour. Luckily for Mr. Norris, Miss Christina was at that moment wooing the muse of political economy (if there be such an old lady) in a sort of avenue of stunted pollards at the back of the house, while Miss Lucy was plying her unwearied needle on the delineation of a macaw of most brilliant plumage, intended for the decoration of a screen in Margaret's drawing-room.

"Dear me, Mr. Norris! how kind of you!" began Miss Lucy, deliberately laying aside her work, the better to enjoy a little chat with him. "Do sit down. How very kind of you this——"

"My dear Miss Lucy," interrupted Norris, "the question now is about *your* kindness, and as I know you are the very kindest person in the world, I am come to take you away with me to Oak Park. We have just left Mrs. Wentworth alone for the first time; and though she will be sure to hear our voices under her window very nearly as early as the lark above them, I think you would save her from an hour or two of painful meditation, if you would pack up your nightcap and come back with me."

"I shall be ready in half a moment," replied Lucy, cramming her worsteds into a bag with the greatest rapidity; "I will only stay to put on my bonnet—only there's sister Christina, she must be told."

"Where is Miss Christina?" said Norris.

"Walking in the avenue," replied Miss Lucy; "I hope she will not keep me very long."

"If you will put on your bonnet, Miss Lucy, I will speak to Miss Christina, and then meet you at the front door in half a moment."

With a very well pleased acquiescence in this arrangement, Miss Lucy ran upstairs, while Mr. Norris found his way to the avenue; and as it was generally agreed throughout the family that no one managed Miss Christina so well as himself, he ventured without any circumlocution to announce that he was going to run away with her sister for—he did not exactly know how long.

"Don't come here quizzing and talking nonsense, Frederic Norris," was the reply; "for I am deeply engaged at this moment."

The young man assumed an air of grave respect, and replied, "Then I will not interrupt you for an instant, but explain everything another time;" and putting his finger to his lip in

token that no more words must be spoken, he crept away as if fearful that the very movement of the leaves might disturb her. Highly delighted at this attention, and muttering that nobody understood her so well as Frederic Norris, the little lady nodded, and could never after scold with any great degree of perseverance on account of Miss Lucy's elopement.

Nothing could have been more judicious than this manœuvre on the part of Mr. Norris. On arriving at Oak Park, they found its lonely mistress listlessly sitting before her tea-table, a volume of Shakspeare beside the tea-tray on one side, and her fair arm supporting her head on the other.

Had the spirits of Isabella never been crushed and broken by nearly two years of incessant suffering, she would not have thus shrunk from companionship with herself. The time had been, when, despite her lively spirits, she had been heard to declare (and truly) that a walk in the meadows, quite, *quite* alone, was one of the greatest pleasures in the world. She read, too, with as much steady perseverance as a mouse nibbles a cheese, and when thus employed, best loved to be alone; but since her husband's death, that innate independent fund of enjoyment which every healthy intelligent human being has within him, was no longer at her command, and the thoughtful kindness of Norris upon this occasion was almost as useful as if it had been exerted to prevent a child from being left alone with a sharp knife.

As the drawing-room door opened, Isabella raised her eyes, and the tone in which she exclaimed "Aunt Lucy!" was sufficient payment to him for the self-denial he had shown in forsaking his Margaret, at the very moment of seeing her for the first time in possession of such a home as he deemed worthy of her; and to Lucy it conveyed the assurance that she had been quite right this time, in not caring for what Christina might say.

Frederic Norris let them embrace, and playfully bending his knee, kissed the hand of Isabella, nodded a farewell to the companion of his drive, and then left them.

It may be doubted if Miss Lucy ever felt so perfectly happy before, during the whole course of her life. The very fact that she had been brought there to be of service to Isabella, was of itself quite enough to elevate her to an extraordinary pitch of happiness; but in addition to this she felt, without the check of any real or imaginary drawbacks, the comfort of seeing the darling whom her family had mourned as worse than dead, still surrounded with the splendour they had been all taught to deplore, but freed from the tormentor who had contrived to convert all his gold into dross.

Had Isabella studied her happy countenance very accurately, she might have seen all this, which would have been a pity, as it would have instantly changed the current of her own thoughts from what was very cheerful to what was very sad; but fortunately she was occupied in attending to her neglected teapot, and saw nothing but that dear aunt Lucy seemed delighted to be with her.

When the tea-tray was removed, and the windows closed, the embroidery and the worsted bag were brought forward, proving that they were to be very snug and very comfortable.

"How long it is, Isabella, since I have heard you read!" said Miss Lucy. "How I did use to love it!"

"Shall I read to you now, aunt Lucy?" said Isabella, cheerfully.

"Will you? Oh, what a treat!"

"And what shall it be?"

"Some play or other, of course. But let it be something droll, Isabella, I have not had a hearty laugh I don't know when."

Isabella thought for a moment, and then stepped to one of those pretty contrivances by which drawing-room ornaments have been converted into repositories for poetry, the drama, and romance; and selected thence a volume that contained "*The Rivals*;" and it was certainly not within the memory of man that the walls of that elegant apartment had echoed to such peals of hearty laughter as Mrs. Malaprop drew from Miss Lucy.

Of all the materials for happiness with which the bounteous Giver of all good has furnished us, the power of giving pleasure to others is perhaps the one that is the most sure never to fail the employer of it. Never perhaps had Isabella felt happier than during this evening; it was the first time the simple-minded affectionate Lucy had been domesticated with her, and there was such an innocent air of keen enjoyment of everything Isabella did and said to please her, that it must have been a far different temper from her own that could have failed to rejoice in such power. The spinsters of Appleton dined early; and the cold chicken, the peaches, and the Rhine wine that followed the lecture, were by no means thrown away; nor was it till the timepiece had uttered twelve golden notes to say "good-night," that they took heed of its warnings, and separated.

Far different was the next morning meeting on the lawn, from what it would have been had not aunt Lucy shared it; and when after a gay hour spent in looking at the Norrises' beautiful house, and "their most intelligent little girl that ever was born," and their flowers, and their chickens, and their ponies, and

their haystack, the parties divided for their separate breakfasts ; the having to make aunt Lucy particularly happy and comfortable again being a perfect antidote to the sadness which might otherwise have been Isabella's companion.

While at breakfast, the postbag, which, excepting for the newspaper, would now have been almost an idle ceremony, was, as usual, presented to Isabella, who opened it chiefly to give her companion an opportunity of knowing what names that she never heard of before were joined in wedlock, and the like.

Considerably to her surprise, a letter also appeared ; and her first glance at the address showed her that it was from Mrs. Wentworth. It was above a year since she had been last so honoured ; and then the epistle only contained a polite, and indeed rather cordial, approval of the magnificent monument which had been since erected in Oakton church, and which she had seen at the sculptor's.

The present despatch was in an equally gracious, but less melancholy tone, expressing the deep interest she must ever feel in Isabella, and proposing, if perfectly convenient, to pay her a visit of a day or two, both for the pleasure of seeing her, and for the melancholy satisfaction of looking once again upon dear Oak Park.

This intimation, which was perfectly unexpected, was not received without considerable emotion. Whatever struggles with herself Isabella might have had concerning her feelings towards her husband, none existed, nor ever did exist after her marriage, about those she entertained for his mother. She disliked her heartily, and stood exactly in that sort of awe of her and her finery, and airs of all sorts, which was best calculated to destroy her comfort in every way so long as she might please to stay.

Had this been all, however,—had the annoyance only consisted in what finer ladies would have called “a bore,” Isabella would have submitted to it with the most perfect resignation ; but there was, moreover, much embarrassment as to the manner of her reception. To obtrude the society of her own family, for whom she had unvaryingly manifested such unequivocal contempt, was out of the question ; neither was the idea of passing some days *tête-à-tête* with a woman who had (almost without an attempt to conceal it from her) exerted herself to the utmost to make her appear contemptible in the eyes of her husband, a much more agreeable plan.

She had handed the letter, as soon as she had read it, to her companion ; and, though without much hope that the gentle Lucy could help her, she watched her through the elegantly



written, highly scented page, and then exclaimed, "What in the world shall I do with her, aunt Lucy?"

"Do anything but invite any of us to meet her, for that she would consider quite as an affront," replied Miss Lucy.

"Then must I sit and talk to her *tête-à-tête*, all the time she stays?" said Isabella, almost shuddering.

"No, indeed, my dear, I should do no such thing."

"Then what would you do?"

"I should just invite as many of the finest people that you know as would make up a small party; but they must all come far enough to sleep here. You know the Harebys never return—nor my Lord Morrison and his sister, from what's its name castle: and so, you know, they'd be here at breakfast, and all day too, if you'll ask them to stay over. That's what I should do, Isabella; and she could not help being very much obliged to you, as those sort of people were the only ones she ever chose to see, you know—not but what, by all Margaret Norris tells me, there was not one among them that did not dislike her;—but that, you know, is no business of yours; and so that's what I should do.

"And that is exactly what I will do, aunt Lucy," replied Isabella, holding out her hand in token of gratitude for the counsel, which had at once more than half cured her annoyance; "but there is one thing more you can do for me, and if you will agree to it, my troubles will be all over for the present."

"What is that, Isabella?" said Lucy, greatly delighted.

"Will you stand by me, dear aunt, throughout the whole business? Will you consent to stay with me?"

"I! my dear? I, of all people in the world! Why, my dear Isabella, if she does not recollect me, which, most likely, she will not, for I never spoke to her in my life, I should not be at all surprised if she stared at me, and asked if I were your mantua-maker."

"And if she does, aunt Lucy, I will reply, 'No, ma'am; this lady is a grand-daughter to Sir Edward Harding,' and you will see the porcupine-quills of her impertinence settle themselves down till she becomes as smooth as a dove. Make no more objections, aunt Lucy. Indeed I must have you."

"I would do more than that to please you, Isabella; but do you know," she continued with a very youthful and ingenuous blush, "I cannot understand why you should fix upon me; I should have thought your pretty, elegant-looking sister Margaret would have done so much better."

"No, aunt Lucy, she would not—and, besides, I believe you are the only one of the family that she has never been rude to—therefore, you are the only one I can take the liberty of asking."

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When the next-door neighbours met again, the Norrises were astonished to find what a vast deal of important business had been got through by Isabella and her aunt in the interval. Mrs. Wentworth's letter had been received and answered; sundry invitations sent out; a voluminous work on Political Economy, and another on the Nature of Parliaments, picked out from the library, and conveyed by Miss Lucy and Isabella to Appleton, where they obtained with little difficulty, in return, a gracious permission from Miss Christina for the prolonged absence of her too meekly submissive sister; and, into the bargain, they had made a morning visit at Abbot's Preston on their return, to tell the family there of the unexpected guest who was about to arrive, and of all that was going forward in consequence.

Miss Lucy's plan proved eminently successful, in all ways; for Mrs. Wentworth senior declared herself much gratified by the attention which had brought to meet her the only people she really cared about in the neighbourhood. Lord Morrison and his agreeable sister, Miss Cately, agreed to pass a week at the Park, so that no moment of the *tête-à-tête* intercourse so much dreaded took place; and, moreover, the dinner-parties, which were skilfully made to vary every day of her stay, were given in a style of such very satisfactory elegance, that she was heard, in addressing the guests, to speak of the fair mistress of the mansion, as "my daughter" with rather ostentatious frequency.

Things went so well, indeed, that Isabella found no occasion to refer to Miss Lucy's grandfather; but that, perhaps, might be principally owing to the very cordial hand-shaking which took place between her and the honourable Miss Cately; but, what was perhaps more extraordinary still, Mrs. Wentworth *mother* actually condescended to inquire for the family of Mrs. Wentworth *daughter*, and declared that she should be most happy to see them. But her sincerity on this point was not put to the test, as they all took especial care not to come near her.

The "day or two" having extended themselves to six, Mrs. Wentworth departed, so perfectly satisfied with her visit as not only to hint at repeating it, but to bestow a most cordial invitation upon her daughter-in-law in return, which, much as it surprised Isabella, was perfectly sincere. The cause of all this may be told in very few words. Mrs. Wentworth senior, notwithstanding her milliner's bill had amounted during the last year and a half to the sum of five hundred and twenty-seven pounds thirteen and sixpence, had not found any titled individual inclined to petition for her still fair hand, except two, who would gain so very much more by the bargain than herself, that after mature consideration, she declined to be so expensively *my-ladyed*.

It was soon after the last of these adventures, that Mrs. Wentworth chanced to hear it asserted at a dinner-party, that Lord Morrison only waited for the expiration of young Mrs. Wentworth's second year of widowhood to propose to her.

Now the next best thing to being married to a lord herself, would be, she thought, the having a person she could speak of as "my daughter," married to one. Thence arose the amiable proposal of making Isabella a visit; and, naturally confirmed in her belief of Lord Morrison's intentions by the friendly terms it was evident the families were upon, the invitation to her in return was sure to follow.

Though the period of her stay had passed off (thanks to aunt Lucy) with infinitely less annoyance than had been anticipated, her departure was nevertheless exceedingly welcome; for there was a genuine truth and simple sincerity in the character of Isabella, which rendered the task of receiving her exceedingly irksome. Her visit, however, had done good, for it had effectually broken into the solitude which was naturally felt as peculiarly painful after the breaking up of the domestic circle which the Norrises had formed around her, and which, from the active kindness it had called upon her to exert within its precincts, had so thoroughly reconciled her to her home.

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## CHAPTER XL.

PURELY inventive as Gossip often is, it does sometimes happen that her voice speaks truth. Three months before Isabella had been two years a widow, Lord Morrison did propose to her, and that in a manner so expressive of passionate affection, and so magnificently liberal in respect to settlements, as to leave no doubt of his being induced to do so by genuine attachment for herself, and not for the *beaux yeux de sa cassette*, which her circumstances might, in many cases, have rendered sufficiently probable.

The effect of this perfectly unexpected proposal on Isabella was singular. Lord Morrison was a man whose affection and esteem might have gratified the feelings of any woman, and Isabella was quite aware of it; but the idea—the mere suggestion of the possibility of her ever marrying again, threw her into an agitation that made her turn pale and tremble from head to foot.

It happened that her mother was sitting with her at the moment; and as the emotion was much too powerful to be con-

cealed, it followed that the letter could not be concealed either.

"Gracious Heaven!" exclaimed Mrs. Worthington, gazing at her as she read; "What news can that letter convey, my child, to affect you thus? Tell me, Isabella, at once. Something terrible has happened somewhere, I am very sure."

"No, mamma, no," said Isabella, folding up the letter; "there is nothing the matter."

"You used to boast that you had no secrets from me," said her mother, looking vexed and anxious; "but those days are over, Isabella?"

"No, mamma, no," reiterated Isabella; "those dear days are not over; yet I would rather you should not see this letter. I think it would be ungenerous to show it."

"Do nothing ungenerous, Isabella," replied Mrs. Worthington; "I will endeavour to forget it."

But there was no mistaking the restless uneasy look that remained on her mother's countenance; and, unable to endure the inflicting any species of pain where she had already caused so much, she put Lord Morrison's letter into her mother's hands, saying,—

"Let it be talked about as little as possible, mamma."

The letter took not long to read; but considerably before it was finished, every trace of uneasiness had completely passed away from the countenance of Mrs. Worthington, and was succeeded by a very different expression.

"A very flattering letter, this, Isabella," said she; "and it is difficult to believe that you can receive it unfavourably. It shall not be talked of, dearest, at present; you are quite right in that, as it is probable you will wish another three months to elapse before—before anything happens in consequence of it. But from your agitation, my love, I presume it was not unexpected."

"Indeed, indeed, it was!" replied Isabella eagerly. "The possibility of such a thing never suggested itself to me, or, most surely, I should not have acted as I have done."

"How so, dearest? what can you have done which this noble proposal can make you repent?"

"I have, it may be, encouraged the belief that it would be accepted," replied Isabella, mournfully; "and for the world I would not have done so, had I foreseen it."

"Then you do not intend to accept it, Isabella?" said her mother, endeavouring to speak as if she were neither disappointed nor surprised.

"Accept it!" cried Isabella, with a shudder; "Oh, mamma!"

Mrs. Worthington was not slow in comprehending the feeling which produced this reply, but had too much delicacy to dilate

upon the subject; for though, like most of her fellow-mortals, she had some partiality for rank and wealth, nothing could be further from her heart than any wish to lead the inclination of a child on such a subject by any wishes of her own. She therefore only said in reply,—“I thank you for your confidence, my dear Isabella. I should have been very restless and uneasy without it, I confess; and as long as you wish that nothing should be said on the subject, you may trust to my remaining silent.”

“Then that will be for ever!” replied Isabella, “and I thank you for your promise. The only thing, I think, that could increase my pain at receiving this letter, would be the idea of its being talked of.”

Mrs. Worthington was quite capable, notwithstanding the different view which she took of the matter in question, of appreciating the delicacy of this feeling, and accordingly the subject was never again mentioned. The excellent Lord Morrison received his answer, and almost immediately set off with his sister upon an excursion to Athens—and so ended the affair.

Having no great faith in the murderous nature of the tender passion, Isabella soon recovered from the vexation of believing that she had given lasting pain to a person who possessed her fullest esteem; but the effect of this overture upon herself was more lasting. Notwithstanding the vicinity of her beloved sister and her truly amiable husband—notwithstanding the easy distance between Oak Park, Abbot's Preston, and Appleton, and the ever-ready sociability of many other agreeable neighbours, Isabella had begun to feel, as the winter approached, that she wished she had some unmarried sister or intimate friend who could share with her the mansion whose very elegance sometimes seemed to mock her solitude. But from the time this offer of marriage reached her, the whole routine of her life seemed suddenly to change. The solitary hours which had before appeared long and difficult to occupy, became the most delightful part of her existence. All the employments that she used to delight in when a girl recurred to her mind, accompanied with such an acute feeling of the blessedness of having her time entirely and altogether at her own command, that she set about employing it with a zest approaching that with which a prisoner enjoys free possession of light and air, after long confinement in a dungeon. She read, she played, she drew, she sung; and having been terrified, as it were, by the vision of a new marriage, seemed to feel for the first time the full value of her liberty. Nor did these habits, once resumed, again forsake her; another winter passed rapidly away, and when spring arrived it was not without stealing an hour or two from her morning slumbers, that she could

find time sufficient for all she had to do, and the long-loved personal attendance upon her flowers, besides.

But though the elastic spring of health and youth had fully resumed its play, Isabella was still, in her feelings and manner of life, very unlike what most young women would have been at her age, under similar circumstances of position and pursuit; and equally so, perhaps, to what she might have been herself, had the short period of her married life passed differently. As it was, however, there appeared to be a singular averseness to every species of expense that was merely personal. Poor Mr. Wentworth had always seemed to fancy that the dressing up of his beautiful wife in articles of the most elegant and expensive quality, was a proof of devoted affection; and that her being forever draped in cashmeres, satins, lace, and embroidery, while sitting in solitary state to read his "papers" and listen to his eternal reprimands, constituted a species of dignified retirement from the more vulgar vanities of the ordinary world, sufficient to stamp them both as persons belonging to the very highest class of England's refined and exclusive aristocracy. It is not therefore very wonderful, perhaps, that Isabella felt a sort of instinctive love for the simplest possible style of dress consistent with her situation; and, indeed, from the time she put off her mourning she seemed to have a particular pleasure in making Mrs. Norris's dress the exact model of her own. Marmaduke the first of Oak Park had built and endowed six almshouses, bearing his arms engraved on large shields of stone on no less than seven conspicuous points of the building and its enclosure, and Marmaduke the second erected a school-house in precisely a similar style, with decorations to match, the twenty children admitted thereto wearing a conspicuous uniform, and bearing, as badges of merit, large medals of tin, inscribed MERIT, surmounted with the Wentworth crest on one side and the words "Wentworth Charity School" on the other.

Now Isabella's hand and heart were "open as day to melting charity;" but somehow or other the sight of these ten boys and ten girls in their yellow stockings and yellow gloves, with the tight rigid jacket and breeches of the queer-looking boys, and the stiff harsh little gowns and pinners of the formal-looking girls, was an hebdomadal vexation to her; besides, the parish of Oakton could have furnished at least one hundred children, instead of twenty, to whom free education would have been a blessing. So, after consulting the rector and churchwardens, and discovering that there was no endowment constituting this masquerade attire of the little people by law, she vested a sum in the funds, of which the clergyman and parish officers for the time being were trustees; for the maintenance of a school ten times as large, if necessary,

but without either uniform or medals. The almshouses, though there also was a uniform as remarkable as any that ever was used in a gaol, it was out of her power to remedy ; but in addition to the close, short, linsey-woolsey gown of bright blue, she bestowed six cloaks in winter, and six shawls in summer, as various in shape and colour as it was well possible to make them. In this, however, there was no opposition, either real or imaginary, to her late husband's wishes or will ; for, to say truth, Mr. Wentworth, though never behind-hand when any public appeal was made to his charity, never accustomed himself to any personal familiarity either with the poor people or their wants ; and as she had never heard him express any opinion on the subject of charity uniforms, she could not of course offend his memory by yielding to her intense aversion to ostentation in banishing them. On the same principle, her almost daily walk through the village with Margaret was made as little in the style of a progress as possible ; and though she could not prevent her poor neighbours from hailing her approach as a signal of hope and comfort, she took excellently good care that their independence should not be the price paid for what she bestowed. For, though there existed no Wentworth clothing society, or Wentworth coal society, or the like, there was not a poor body in the parish who did not know that, for as many pennies as they could save per week, for either the one or the other, Madam Wentworth would give them double every quarter-day, with abundance of approbation and friendly attention to boot.

Another of her innovations was the converting her deer-park into grazing-ground for cows ; and any labourer who could raise money enough to purchase one, had pasturage afforded him in summer, and fodder in winter, on the sole condition that the milch cows should be milked in the park, when a little afternoon gossip, now and then, with the notable bodies who came to milk them, did extremely well in lieu of the domiciliary visits with which most Lady Bountifuls fancy themselves privileged to hinder and torment their poor neighbours.

This "grazing charity," in Mr. Norris's opinion, did more towards keeping up the honest pride and courageous industry of his parishioners than any other thing whatever ; and Isabella was sometimes heard to boast that it had cost her nothing but her venison.

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During the summer that followed, the young widow's sources of occupation and interest were augmented by the birth of a nephew, and soon after, still greater variety offered itself, from change of air being recommended to Mrs. Norris. The three months' leave of absence annually allowed to clergymen was

immediately devoted by Mr. Norris to the agreeable project of taking his wife and children to the sea, which scheme was no sooner mentioned to Isabella than she offered to join them.

"That is exactly what we were hoping for," said Mr. Norris, gaily waving his hand over his head, in token of his glee.

"And now, then, Isabella shall fix where we are to go. Where shall it be, Isabella?" said Margaret, eagerly.

"Have you really no preference, either of you?" inquired Isabella. They both assured her they had not. "If so," she said, "if this be really the case, Margaret, I should like the Isle of Wight. I should like Shanklin. It would be a pleasure to me to look upon my poor baby's tomb."

This was said very calmly; but tears were in her eyes; and the choice was agreed to willingly, but with very few words.

It was on a beautiful afternoon, in the month of August, that the carriage conveying Isabella, Mr. Norris, and Charles (who had been enlisted by Mrs. Wentworth as one of the party) drove up to the inn at Shanklin. Margaret, the baby's nurses, &c., remaining at Ryde, till the advanced squadron should find accommodation for them all.

At first coming within sight of the well-remembered objects in the village, Isabella more than half repented having ventured to awaken the multitude of painful recollections that pressed upon her heart. But she looked up, and saw the happy face of Norris, and the bright eye of Charles looking round with ecstasy on the lovely scenery; whereupon *self* was so very nearly forgotten as to let her enter into the feelings of both; and she was rewarded, as generally happens in such cases, by infinitely more happiness than if she had sought to derive the feeling from herself. Well pleased was she, however, to find that the house which now offered the best accommodation was one built since her visit there, and at a considerable distance from the pretty rustic toy on the side of the ravine wherein she had suffered so deeply. But even this could not take them all, so Charles and Isabella sought and found a much smaller domicile; which, however, they agreed was amply large enough for them.

Having left orders that everything in both mansions should be put in readiness, they returned to Ryde; and, after spending the next morning in exploring its beauties, during which hours a party of servants were sent forward to prepare for them, the whole party repaired to Shanklin, that prettiest of marine villages, with all that keen delight that the sea, when not quite a familiar object, is sure to inspire.

The two houses were near enough to each other to enable



their tenants to be as much together as they liked, without fatigue or inconvenience of any kind, and, as Norris and his wife were neither such early risers nor such sturdy walkers as Isabella and Charles, the arrangement was decidedly advantageous. Nor was it the less so in Isabella's case, because it stripped her, in appearance, of all her dignified appendages. Carriage, horses, coachman, footman, and groom were all, of necessity, lodged in the house occupied by the Norrises and their nursery; and from thence whatever appearance of style attached to the party must emanate, for the abode of Isabella and her brother barely sufficed to lodge themselves and two female domestics.

But this suited them both excellently well; and was of real advantage to Isabella, as it formed as great a contrast as need be to her mode of living when last in the island; a circumstance more conducive, perhaps, than she was herself aware, to her subsequent enjoyment of the present expedition.

Before five o'clock on the following morning, Charles Worthington was afoot, exploring, under the cliffs and over the cliffs, all the enchanting scenery within five miles of Shanklin; and at six, Isabella, wishing at once, and alone, to indulge in the melancholy gratification of visiting her infant's grave, wrapped her cloth cloak about her and stole forth, comforted by the certainty that she should meet no one who could guess her errand or impede it.

Without difficulty she discovered the dwelling of the clerk, who, looking earnestly at her, but evidently without recognizing the pale attenuated mother whom he had seen, but little more than three years before, fainting beside her infant's grave, took the church key, at her request, and preceded her to the low, but picturesque little building.

On reaching it, the man stood aside to let her enter, on which she turned to him, and said, "Leave me here by myself, will you, for a few minutes?"

She was pale, and tears were in her eyes as she spoke, while the whole expression of her face was changed from what it had been when first she addressed him at his own door. The man looked earnestly at her, and the idea that he had seen her before came across him, but where or when he knew not.

"If you please, my lady," he said, in answer to her request; and, having closed the door, he sat down in the porch to ruminate where it was he could have seen that beautiful but mournful-looking lady before.

Isabella fancied that she knew well the exact spot where she had stood beside her husband to see their child laid in the earth; but when she entered the church, she found that, small as it

was, she had totally forgotten the topography of it. In fact, her agony had been much too great, when last she stood there, for any very distinct idea of the objects around to remain on her mind. She knew that a small mural tablet had been put up after they left the island, and it was this she now sought, thinking it would be near the grave, and serve to direct her to it. But she sought in vain; and having more than once wandered without success into every part of the church that she thought likely to show her what she came to see, she was approaching the door by which she came in, when it opened, and the old clerk entered.

He had during this interval been employed on a problem that tormented him: "Where had he before seen the lady who had just entered the church?" For a considerable time all his pondering was in vain; but at last something or other, some thought of which it would have been impossible to trace the pedigree, brought back the image of the pale mother who had seemed to die beside the little coffin which had been so pompously deposited, three years before, in the centre aisle.

No sooner had this remembrance struck him, than he began to feel uneasy at her lengthened stay, fearing lest the same alarming weakness which he had then witnessed might return upon her, which, if left alone with no friendly arm to support her, might lead to danger.

Under this impression, the old man gently pushed open the heavy door, and went in. At no great distance from it, but still looking round with an air that showed she had not yet found what she had come to see, stood Isabella, and the right note in his memory having been touched, he then remembered her perfectly. Though certainly in no danger of fainting, she looked harassed and agitated; and rightly guessing the cause, he touched her hand respectfully, and pointed to the spot on the floor which he knew she was looking for. Isabella looked inquiringly in his face, and he moved on without speaking to the place, about two-thirds up the aisle, where a broad flagstone was visible, with the letters M. W. upon it.

The old man stepped back a pace or two, and Isabella stood gazing on it till the big tears might have proved to the good clerk, had any doubt remained, that it was the buried babe's mother who stood there.

"The church is too cold for you, my lady, at this time in the morning. Please don't stay no longer."

"And the tablet?" said Isabella.

Again the old man moved on, and stopped beside the rails of the altar, where, in a sort of niche, which had concealed it from her, but which gave the position an air of being sacred and

apart, she saw inscribed on very pure white marble, with date, age, and so forth, the words, "Marmaduke Wentworth, the infant son of Marmaduke Wentworth, Esquire, of Oak Park, Somersetshire, and of Isabella his wife."

Having read this, and re-read it, as much as her friendly companion thought advisable, he again touched her hand, saying, "Come, my lady, come, 'tis put in an honourable place, as you see, and that was chosen for it," said the old man, moving on before her, "by our vicar's young cousin, Mr. Reynolds, who was by when—but you did not observe him, I dare say."

Not feeling at that instant much interested about the vicar's cousin, Isabella made no reply; but so nobly rewarding the attention the man had shown her, as to make him start, she turned away while he was yet engaged in locking the church door, and walked slowly to the churchyard gate. The little contrivance by which it was fastened puzzled her; and while she was yet engaged in the endeavour to open it, a tall young man, who had just left the parsonage garden, turned from the path he was pursuing to assist her.

She looked up to thank him; and, although no idea of having ever seen him before crossed her mind, he knew her instantly—a proof that the last two years had sufficed to undo the work of the preceding ones, for the stranger was no other than the same Alfred Reynolds who had stood close beside her when her child was buried, without having the least idea that the pale and sunken features he then looked upon were those of the blooming girl his young heart had worshipped at Abbot's Preston. But now, though her beautiful eyes were still wet with tears, he thought her lovelier than ever, and the little gate might have been sooner opened had his hand not trembled as the remembrance of former days rushed upon his recollection.

Unconscious of all this, Isabella curtsied, and walked on: and so did Reynolds, but in a contrary direction; for he, at that moment, felt no courage to make himself known.

Having satisfied the very natural feeling which had led her to the grave of her child, Isabella felt more solaced than saddened by the visit, and took her way along the cliffs unfearingly, though alone, and certainly enjoying not a little the power of profiting by the activity which nature had given her, and which, when last in that beautiful region, was as useless to her as the wings of the hapless birds whom loving ladies keep encaged that they may caress and feed them with sugar.

It so happened, however, that she did not fall in with her brother; but after a long, breezy, invigorating walk, returned to their cottage before him.

She was sitting with the newspaper in her hand, waiting breakfast for him, when he entered with the tall stranger who had opened the churchyard gate for her.

"I have made you wait for your breakfast, I fear, Isabella," were his first words; "but I have most unexpectedly popped upon an old friend, whom I left fixed at Oxford, as I thought, reading for orders. Do you not remember Reynolds, Isabella?"

"Alfred Reynolds?" said Isabella colouring, and looking exceedingly surprised; "surely I remember your old school-fellow, but I can hardly believe that this is he?"

"It is though," said Charles, laughing; "and though he is grown from four feet six to six feet four, or thereabouts, I will undertake to answer for his identity, and so please to give him some breakfast."

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Reynolds, and I hope you are quite well," said Isabella, extending her hand to him, and remembering, at the same moment, both the rencounter of the morning and the name which the clerk had quoted as that of the person who had selected the place for the tablet. "You must forgive the friends who have not seen you for four or five years, if they do not know you again," she added; "for you are amazingly grown."

"A long illness, that laid me low for many weeks, did that for me," said the young man; "and that at an age when, I believe, most lads have ceased to grow. But I know not if I have greatly profited thereby: I was formerly honoured with the soubriquet of dwarf, and now I run some risk, I am afraid, of having it changed for giant."

"Your health, I hope, has not suffered," said Isabella kindly.

"Do you think he looks as if it had?" said Charles, eyeing him laughingly from head to foot.

"No, certainly,—Mr. Reynolds looks extremely well," said Isabella, colouring again at being thus called upon to examine the appearance of one of the finest young men in the world. "But it often happens, you know, that such very rapid growth injures the health."

"Not in my case," said Reynolds, colouring also; "I was very near death, they told me; but as the monster missed me, he seems to have carried away all his artillery with him for the present."

The coffee, eggs, hot rolls, and prawns here made their appearance; and it was evident that the morning air and the gay breeze from France had given very tolerable appetites to the whole party, notwithstanding the feelings of a more sentimental kind, which might perhaps, under other circumstances, have produced contrary effects.

"And what brought you here, Mr. Hardreadæ?" said Charles, as the meal went on. "I should as soon have thought of meeting the Bodleian itself exploring the under cliff."

"My mother has taken a little cottage, about a mile off, for the sake of the sea-air, which has been recommended for her health," replied Reynolds; "and so I have packed up as much divinity as I could carry, and brought it here; where, if the rocks and the waves will let me, I can read, you know, as well as at Oxford."

"If," said Charles with emphasis; "you must be a monstrosously resolute fellow if you can sit at home poring over divinity in such a country as this. Don't you think so, Isabella?"

"For you and I, and such-like butterfly gentry, it might," she replied; "but I remember hearing of old of Mr. Reynolds's devotion to his studies."

"Yes, yes; but that was a different thing. He had to get New College by a devilish hard struggle. But a few months in the matter of ordination won't signify, I suppose, Alfred? And upon my life, we shall quarrel with you, if you don't relax a little, and go about with us."

"You shall have no need to quarrel with me on that score," replied the young man; "an hour or two in the morning, and an hour or two at night, will easily settle accounts with my conscience about the reading. And I am an accomplished guide to the island, as I shall be happy to prove, if you will give me leave. I have been here repeatedly with my friend, and have walked over every inch of it."

"Good, and now you may begin again with me."

"You have another old acquaintance here, Mr. Reynolds," said Isabella, "and after breakfast we must go and pay her a visit. Do you remember my sister Margaret?"

"Most certainly I do," replied Alfred; "she is married, is she not?"

"Yes, and has a son and daughter, who make her look exceedingly venerable, I assure you. I think you will be pleased to make acquaintance with her husband. Mr. Norris is one of the most amiable and agreeable men I have ever known."

This friendly proposal was gratefully accepted; and when their pleasant breakfast was at length over, they sallied forth, and presently met the whole Norris family, nurse, and nursery-girl included, *en route* to find the cottage, and inquire what Isabella and Charles meant to do with themselves during the morning.

Mrs. Norris's recognition of Alfred Reynolds was very cordial; but, like her sister, she was fain to confess that she should not have known him. Mr. Norris remembered his name at the University, and all parties seemed well pleased at the meeting.

"Can you tell me, Isabella, of some pleasant spot," inquired

Margaret, "where we can put the children to sit in the shade and receive this delightful air upon them, while I stroll about with you a little?"

"Mr. Reynolds can, I think, if I cannot," replied her sister; "he has promised to make himself the guide of the island for us."

The desired nook was soon found, and a plan for the morning arranged. Mrs. Norris was at present no great walker, so the carriage was ordered to be opened, which, as Charles particularly requested to drive, accommodated them all, and they took the beautiful road to Mirables.

"That is our shed," said Alfred, touching his friend's arm, and pointing to a very small, but very pretty thatched cottage, situated in a field at a short distance from the road. "My mother and I are living there in a state of the most primitive simplicity. I will take you to see her, Charles, one of these days."

"I know no one whose acquaintance I have been so long wishing to make," replied Charles,—“and I remember my sisters used to say the same, after listening to your long yarns about her. Why should we not go now?"

The two sisters simultaneously pronounced their assent, though Isabella added, with her usual consideration for every one—"But, shall we not be too large a party to take her unexpectedly? You say she is here for her health, Mr. Reynolds; will she like to be so broken in upon?"

Alfred turned a bright eye-glance upon her, such as recalled a look she remembered in former days; and after a moment's pause, he answered, "You are very kind! Believe me, there are few things my mother would like better than being presented to friends from whom I have received so much kindness. But she is, indeed, a recluse; so, if you will stop a moment, and wait for me, I will run up and tell her that you will all come in and eat brown bread and butter with her, on your way back from Mirables. I should like you to know her, Charles," he added in a whisper.

This proposal being agreed to by acclamation, the young man sprang out of the carriage; and clearing the fence at a bound, ran up the path that led to his very humble home.

"What an extremely handsome man he is grown into!" exclaimed Margaret, as soon as he was out of hearing. "I remember his face was always beautiful, but I never expected to see him like what he is now."

"Why, yes," said Charles, removing a fly from one of the horses with his whip, "my friend Alfred is a tolerably fine-looking fellow, as men go; but I tell you what, Norris," he added, turning round, and addressing his brother-in-law with energy, "if you wish to make acquaintance with the noblest heart, the

clearest head, the most elegant mind, and the finest temper that it ever pleased Heaven to bestow on man, now is your time. Reynolds is all this, and a great deal more than I have time to tell you."

"Upon my word, this is enough, Charles, to propitiate the favour of any reasonable man," replied Norris, laughing. "But joking apart, I like him exceedingly; there is a frankness in the tone of his fine manly voice, and in the manner in which he looks with his magnificent eyes upon one, that takes me mightily. What, and who is he?"

"For the *who*," replied Charles, "he is Alfred Reynolds; and for the *what*, he is fellow of New College, and the son of a man who left him not a shilling in the world."

"Poor fellow," said Norris.

"Glorious fellow!" said Charles. "His mother having an annuity of a hundred and fifty pounds a year, contrived to send him to Winchester, and live like a gentlewoman; nevertheless, he very nearly paid his own expenses during the latter part of his stay,—a mystery *that*, by the bye, to you Rugby fellows,—and now his fellowship has made him independent, and he is looking forward to the time when, as college tutor, he shall be able to increase the comforts of her advancing age. I believe the notion of rewarding her by his future success for all she has done for him, is never for an instant out of his head. He perfectly idolizes her."

"He is a glorious fellow, Charles; and here he comes again, like a winged Mercury," said Norris.

"My mother is delighted!" cried Alfred, mounting to his former place, and looking at the party with a radiant smile that showed him perfectly sincere. "But she knows everybody at Abbot's Preston, and will torment you with questions about Mr. and Mrs. Worthington, and uncle David, and aunt Lucy, and Miss Christina; and Mrs. Hannah and the dog Neptune into the bargain, very likely."

"I am sure you do them all great honour by so correct a catalogue," said Margaret, laughing. "As you have suffered so many years to elapse without coming to Abbot's Preston to refresh your memory, I almost wonder you should recollect all their names."

"One never forgets people that are kind to one, I think," replied Alfred.

"But why have you never been to see them again?" said Mrs. Norris. "Both my father and mother often speak of you."

"Ay, Margaret, make him tell you that if you can. I went on asking for years, till I got quite tired of it; did I not, Alfred?"

Young Reynolds coloured to the eyes, as he replied evasively, "You have been always kindness itself to me, Charles."

Arrived at the beautiful place they went to visit, the whole party vied with each other in expressions of admiration and delight; it was as new to Isabella as to the Norrises and Charles; for seeing sights was much too plebeian an occupation for Mr. Wentworth, and she knew nothing of the island but what she had seen from her carriage-windows, and from a few points close to Shanklin Chine, to which she used to venture during the days that Mr. Wentworth's absence at Ryde left her at liberty.

"What a multitude of pretty sketches might be taken here," said she, with the eagerness of an amateur artist, who, though almost wholly untaught, had already felt the delight of carrying away with her memoranda of the scenes she admired. "Did you not love sketching very much formerly, Mr. Reynolds?" said she; "I certainly remember our church and our elms honoured by being conveyed to a certain little square sketch-book that you used to carry about with you."

"I own the soft impeachment," replied Alfred. "I am an inveterate sketcher, and stick to my pencil, whenever I afford myself an idle day, as perseveringly as anglers do to their rod."

"And in this island you must have had work enough to do in that way. Is it not so?"

"I have a portfolio *that thick*, I believe," replied Alfred, placing his palms together, with an interval of two good inches between.

"At the cottage?" asked Isabella.

"No! at the college," he answered.

"That is vexatious," said she; "because I feel within me a noble, though perhaps rather audacious, ambition to set about sketching too, and it would be a great assistance to see how it has been managed before."

"No, no; quite the contrary, Mrs. Wentworth," he replied, colouring as he spoke.

Isabella marked the change in his complexion; and thinking it probable enough that he was better judge than artist, concluded that his sketches were not good for much, and determined to say no more on the subject. But her interpretation was altogether wrong; it was the first time he had ever addressed her by her married name, and therefore it was that he coloured.

"No," he resumed; "they would do you more harm than good; if you liked them, you would infallibly set about copying them, and a process more certain than this to check the noble ardour you speak of could not be invented. However," he



added, but he coloured again as he spoke, "I really think I might be useful, if you would permit it, by leading you where pictures, composed as if on purpose to be copied by the pencil, will make the business comparatively easy. I am ready to promise, in the words of Caliban, that,

"I'll show thee every fertile inch of the isle——"

Alfred stopped, but he could honestly have gone on with the quotation, and added :—

"And kiss thy foot. I pr'ythee be my god!"

Isabella, however, having no such stuff in her thoughts, answered very composedly, "I really wish you would; for, having great faith in perseverance and industry, I by no means despair of carrying home with me what I at least shall consider exceedingly worth having."

While this conversation, and a little more of the same kind, went on between Isabella and Mr. Reynolds, Mr. and Mrs. Norris were at least equally interested in the question of whether it would be most advisable to get sea-water to bathe the children in at home, or to borrow Isabella's carriage every morning, to take them to the machines; and Charles had every faculty enchained by watching and enjoying the perfect paces of the steeds he drove.

Mirables was reached before any of the party suspected that they had already arrived at the end and object of their expedition, and its beautiful walks and wonders of all kinds were fully appreciated and enjoyed. This agreeable business ended, they remounted the carriage, and drove back to the little cottage in the field by the road-side.

To drive up to the door was out of the question, for it was approached by a stile leading from the road by a straight path through the two acres of pasture that fronted the dwelling. The ladies were handed out, the carriage left in charge of the footman, and the short distance nearly traversed, when Mrs. Reynolds was seen advancing to meet them.

"Here comes my mother!" said Alfred, stepping forward. "You perceive she is eager for the introduction. Mrs. Norris, Mrs. Wentworth, mother—daughters of the Abbot's Preston rectory, and therefore exceedingly well known to you already; and this is Charles Worthington—you know him, too, mother, tolerably well; and this, Mr. Norris, to whom I have but just been presented myself, but for whose merits I am quite willing to stand godfather. And now, dear mother, is the brown bread and butter ready for us? for, indisputably, we are ready for the brown bread and butter."

This introduction, which, though playfully pronounced, was not without a touch of feeling in its tone, was received by Mrs. Reynolds with an air of unequivocal gratification. She fixed her mild thoughtful eyes upon the countenance of each Worthington as they were presented to her, and seemed in that short glance to recall all she had been made to know of each respectively, and smilingly to compare it with the testimony before her. The scrutiny appeared to answer well; for, with the frankness of old acquaintance, she entered at once into conversation with the two sisters; yet, even while she did so, her manner gave evidence of a feeling that approached timidity, though not sufficiently to chill or check the welcome her heart impelled her to offer to the friends of her son.

A little above the middle height, and delicately formed, with features of faultless regularity, Mrs. Reynolds might still have been *une femme à prétention*, had her thoughts or wishes led that way. As it was, however, her appearance, though rivalling that of a Quaker in neatness, was considerably more homely as to the form and materials of her dress than it is common to see, in these days of universal finery, in any rank. But our sisters were not of the class who shrink from simplicity of attire, as from an authentic symbol of unworthiness; and the fine face of Alfred glowed with pleasure as he watched the favourable impression she evidently made upon them all. The repast was a very gay one, though wine there was none, nor any apology made for the want of it. They had been promised bread and butter, and bread and butter they had, with the addition of a plate of late Alpine strawberries, a basin of cream, and two rustic brown jugs, one filled with water from a crystal stream hard by, and the other with milk.

This first interview with the mother of Alfred did not end without arrangements being made for many future ones. A water party in one of the delightful pilot-boats of the island had been formed for the morrow, to which Alfred had already engaged himself, and to this she was cordially invited; but, shaking her head, she excused herself by confessing to have been through life so perfectly unused to the element, as to have found her voyage from Southampton to the island something very nearly alarming.

"Then come and dine with us on our return," said the two sisters almost in a breath.

"Will you let me walk in after you shall have finished dining?" said Mrs. Reynolds.

"I think we should like it better if you would walk in before," cried Charles, with a degree of animation for which Alfred thanked him with a glance of the eye that spoke much. But a

negative shake of the head again told them, though accompanied by a grateful smile, that the proposal had something impossible about it.

"You are making acquaintance," she said, "with a recluse, whose manner of life has for the last twenty years, or thereabouts, been very much like that of the old woman in fairy tales, who abides by the side of a wood, culls simples, and distils rose-water. And did you ever hear of such a one dining out? No, that is impossible; but we are a talkative, sociable class, nevertheless; always delighted when beautiful ladies come to see us, and quite willing to trot out to any kind neighbour who will accept our tediousness for an hour or two."

There was no mistaking the fact that Mrs. Reynolds did not wish to dine from home; and it was, therefore, settled that she should meet the sailing party at seven o'clock, at the "great house," as that portion of the joint establishment inhabited by the Norrises was termed among them, by way of distinction. But when Isabella talked of the carriage being sent for her, she laughed as heartily as the projector of an excursion from Ryde to Portsmouth might have done, at the notion of a man-of-war being put in commission to convey him thither.

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## CHAPTER XLI.

THE day that followed was one of great enjoyment—the weather was delicious, the sea almost as smooth as glass, yet nevertheless with air sufficient to waft their light bark the way they wished to go. There is, perhaps, no style of intercourse more agreeable than that which arises between old friends long separated, whom circumstances have so completely severed as to make them look, speak, and feel almost like strangers when they first meet again, yet find, as the renewed intimacy goes on, a thousand topics that pleasantly recall the past. So it was with Alfred and the sisters. Old walks, old sports, old jokes were enjoyed over again, till the jocund laugh went round as gaily as in days of yore.

That there is no second spring for man, or woman either, has been said a thousand times; but it is equally true, that while their one spring lasts, it is not a shower, or a storm either, that can permanently check its vigour or destroy its freshness. Isabella was still in that elastic period of existence when sorrow and suffering may bend the spirit to the dust without breaking it; and with pleasure greater than could have readily been expressed

in words, her sister and brother watched the return of the happy thoughts, gay accents, and looks healthful and serene, the loss of which had almost broken their hearts. The sea breeze waned through her curls, and brought back the delicate carnation to her cheek, her sweet eyes laughed again, and every accent of her voice spoke peace and cheerfulness.

The evening came; and remembering well the touching picture Reynolds used to give of his widowed mother's sacrifice of all for him, Isabella seemed delighted at making opportunities of saying and doing everything that she thought could give her pleasure. Nor was it likely the effort should be in vain—a creature with such powers of pleasing as Isabella, exerting them all to soothe and gratify an elderly recluse, who had for half her life sat in the cold shade of poverty, and totally beyond the pale of the only species of society befitting her manners and education, could hardly fail of success; and accordingly, as seldom any day passed without their meeting, she took such strong hold of Mrs. Reynolds's fancy, and, in truth, of her affection too, that the good lady became awakened to the danger her Alfred must run in being exposed to such perilous fascination. This is a subject beyond all others difficult for a mother to discuss with her son; for though, as in Alfred's case, there may exist the most happy confidence between them, still on that subject she will feel that there may be something too tender, or too sacred in it, for even a mother to probe and penetrate.

In ninety-nine instances out of a hundred this consideration might have sufficed to make Mrs. Reynolds look on in silence, trusting to that full knowledge of his almost destitute position which she knew was never absent from Alfred's mind whenever he was called upon to act in circumstances which rendered the remembrance of it necessary. At all other moments, indeed, the feeling that he was and would be sufficient to himself, kept him "high and apart" from all the sordid anxieties which usually irk and work the minds of poor men, and left his spirit as free to taste of all the best pleasures with which Heaven has surrounded us, as that of the happiest of the race born with the silver spoon in their mouths; but in this case of Isabella there was much to produce danger, and set caution to sleep. The extreme simplicity of her manners and way of living might well help a man to forget, while yielding to her manifold fascinations, that he might as well love the moon, for any reasonable hope of winning her, she was "so much above him;" and it was this twofold danger which led Mrs. Reynolds, after this daily intercourse had lasted nearly a month, to open her heart upon the subject to her son.

"What will become of us, Alfred," she began, "when this angelic woman goes hence and is no more seen by us? I know

not how you may feel about it, but I protest to you that I expect to suffer more than ever I did in parting with any companion and friend, except yourself. Tell me ; are we not imprudent in giving ourselves so completely to an enjoyment which we know must so very speedily come to an end ?”

“No, mother ; I think not,” replied Alfred.

“Well, my son, if that be your deliberate judgment, you have more command over your feelings than your mother ; and that is strange, too.”

“I believe I have great command over my feelings, mother. Duty and interest have alike taught me that this was necessary, and that from the very moment I began to feel and to think. I must be dull, indeed, if I had not learnt the lesson,” said Alfred.

“But though on a thousand occasions, my poor boy, this self-command may have been attainable, and, to your well-regulated mind, almost easy, cannot you fancy it possible that it may fail you ? For instance, when this ‘goddess of the island,’ this Isabella, when she turns away, and leaves us, may not your peace of mind follow her ?”

“My peace of mind ?” repeated Alfred, musing.

“Yes, dearest Alfred, your peace of mind. Had I, who so well know you, exerted my imagination to the very utmost to paint a woman calculated to enchant your heart and soul, something wonderfully like Mrs. Wentworth would have been the result. Then is it not probable that with the degree of intimacy which, notwithstanding the disparity of our fortunes, has some how or other crept in amongst us, you may attach yourself hopelessly to her, and remain a miserable man for life ?”

“No, mother. However strongly I might attach myself to her, the attachment could not reasonably be called hopeless ; because I have conceived no project that leaves room for disappointment.”

“Is not this sophistry, Alfred ?”

“No, indeed, it is not. As you have opened your heart to me on the subject, dearest mother, I will be equally candid towards you. You cannot have forgotten how often you have expressed your surprise at my never making a second visit to Abbot’s Preston, the invitations to do so being so constant. This same lady that alarms you now, was the person who alarmed me then, mother. I knew from Charles that she had made a most unhappy, though very wealthy, marriage, and I admired—why should I not own, that young as I was, I loved her too much when she was Isabella Worthington, to endure the sight of her unhappiness as a wife ; it was therefore that I would not trust myself at Abbot’s Preston ; so you see, dearest mother, that I am not an imprudent man on such subjects.”

"And has the admiration, the love, you bore this very charming woman when you were a boy vanished now that you are a man? or is she so much less charming now than formerly, that you no longer fear her power?"

"Neither, mother, neither," replied Alfred, colouring. "I love Isabella, and shall not cease to love her when we cease to meet. But fear not for my tranquillity. You will not, I flatter myself, perceive any difference in me. It is not to-day, dear mother, that you and I have learnt the necessity of subduing our minds to our position. Have I not seen you abstain from all the comforts to which you were accustomed in your younger days, for my sake? No trial can be much severer to my tranquillity, I think, than this has been; yet I have borne it, mother; and as Mrs. Wentworth is as much out of my reach as the comfortable house and sufficient attendance I have so often wished for you, there is no reasonable cause to fear that her being so will work me woe. When she was a wife, I could not, perhaps, have met her as I should have wished to do; but now the case is different. I know perfectly well what my destiny is, and I submit to it."

Whether Mrs. Reynolds were satisfied or not, by her son's mode of reasoning, she felt it difficult to push the question further. His manner was so quiet, so gentle, and so self-possessed, that it seemed useless to persecute him with her doubts and fears respecting his peace of mind. So another month rolled on as the last had done, every hour of it winged with pleasure, though marked with no adventures more stirring than a sketching party, with a luncheon eaten under a rock, or a sail round the island. In all these schemes, Charles, Isabella, and Alfred, were the active agents; and when their plans carried them farther afield than the more domestic members of the society approved, the trio went by themselves. But although in all these excursions Charles perpetually left his sister and friend to their *tête-à-tête* sketching for an hour or two, while he dived and climbed till the hour fixed for their return approached, no syllable in the remotest degree approaching to love-making was ever breathed between them. Nature, poetry, painting, music, were all discussed between them with the enthusiasm of young and ardent minds, and neither could be quite insensible to the species of interest each inspired in the other; but both were guarded, as by some potent magic charm, from dreaming that any tie beyond that of friendship could ever unite them. Isabella, if ever any thought connected with the possibility of a second marriage crossed her mind, trembled and turned pale, as if a vision of some dreaded suffering rose up before her; and if anything could have persuaded her to look at Alfred in any other

light than as the most gifted and amiable human being that ever God created, it would have been somebody's suggesting the possibility of her becoming his wife. While, on the other hand, the idea of asking the richly-endowed Isabella to accept his love, and barter her wealth against his utter destitution, had to the feelings of Alfred something more terrible in it than any other suffering could occasion.

It is true that Norris and his Margaret did sometimes talk together of the great change so visible in Isabella. Of the recovered brightness of her eyes, the deep carnation of her lips, the energy that made all fatigue seem light, and the animation that every word uttered by Alfred appeared to inspire.

"Surely, Frederick, she loves him," said Margaret one day, after an evening in which this had been peculiarly remarkable, "and I shall rejoice if it be so. Isabella is not formed to live alone, and I am quite sure that there have been many hours since we left her, when, notwithstanding her recovered peace, her wealth, and her goodness, she has felt far, very far from happy."

"I have no doubt of it," replied her husband, "and it is natural that it should be so; but take care, Margaret, not in any degree to interfere in this business. If they love each other they will be sure to find it out, without our helping them. But though I allow that it seems the most likely thing in the world, I am considerably puzzled to decide in my own mind as to whether it be or not."

"Oh! I cannot doubt it," she replied; "or at any rate, Frederick, you will allow that on the side of the gentleman there is no doubt?"

"I beg your pardon, Margaret, but I differ from you. I am not quite certain as to either party; but if there be love, it is decidedly more legible on the part of Isabella. In the first place, we know that she is greatly changed in her general manner, and as to the state of her spirits, whereas we have no such means of judging him. He seemed very gay and happy when we first met him, and so he does now, neither more nor less so, as far as I can perceive; and this gaiety of spirits is in him a strong evidence against his being in love; for there can be no doubt that in a worldly point of view the marriage would be so bad a one for Isabella, that he could hardly be so presumptuous as not to have fears for the fate of a proposal, if he ventured to make one."

"That is all very true—yet I am sure Alfred is in love, deeply, devotedly in love with Isabella."

"It may be so—nay, I cannot but think it must be so, for how

can he help it? He has no lovely wife and darling babes to occupy his whole soul, Margaret; and without something of the sort, I profess that I can in no way comprehend the possibility of his conversing with, and gazing at, such a woman as Isabella, and yet keeping his heart unscathed, unless, indeed, he has some previous attachment."

"And if he has," replied Margaret, with some warmth, "he is a traitor. But what is it, Norris, that makes you so sceptical on the subject?"

"Because they don't get on, Margaret. During the first fortnight, though I said nothing about it, I really believed it a settled thing. During the next, I thought so too, but not quite so confidently. The third, from perceiving the exact *statu quo* of the parties, greatly shook my belief; and the last has pretty nearly brought me to the conclusion that if they do love each other, the passion is not strong enough to break down the obstacles which their great inequality of fortune raises between them."

"All very wise, and very well put," replied Margaret, laughing; "but—

‘Those convinced against their will  
Are of the same opinion still.’

Wherefore, my most dear husband, I take leave to retain my own notions. I don't believe you ever watched Alfred Reynolds's eyes as I have done."

"Heyday! pretty Mistress Margaret, what does that mean?"

"Oh! it was a very harmless and innocent study; for it only showed me that after a long, ardent, involuntary sort of gaze, he closed his eyes as if he could bear no more, and then, spite of the equal state of spirits you talk of, he rose abruptly, and left the room."

"Upon my word, good wife, you seem to understand the subject. It was thus, I suppose, that you discovered all the bold hopes and projects I had conceived so long before I found courage to name them? But you began this discussion by stating your conviction that Isabella loved Alfred, and your present eloquence only goes to prove that Alfred loves Isabella. Proceed, I pray you, to explain her feelings as clearly as you have done his."

"It is not so easy, except, indeed, that it is impossible not to see how greatly she is changed."

But neither this conversation, nor many more very like it which followed, threw any light upon the question, which was, in truth, no easy one.

The time was now fast approaching when Mr. Norris must



return to his parish; one or two farewell schemes had been arranged, and even the very day of departure repeatedly alluded to; yet no symptom of love's being still the lord of all appeared in the outward bearing either of Mrs. Wentworth, or of Mr. Reynolds. They had both of them perhaps a little the air of wishing to make the most of their time, and every circulating library in the island was ransacked to find a volume or two on which they wished to compare notes before they parted; and for the last week Alfred breakfasted every morning at the cottage, instead of about every other morning; but, nevertheless, not a word of lamentation was uttered concerning the approaching separation, or of hope about future meetings. Of the latter, perhaps, there might be something, particularly in the heart of Isabella; but there was no need that she should talk about it, and she did not.

The whole party, including Mrs. Reynolds, whose averseness to dining out had long since given way, were sitting on the little lawn behind the "great house," after an early dinner on the last day but one of their stay. The wine and dessert were always taken there; for the month of October, which was now arrived, was as warm as midsummer, and rather than forego this *al fresco* luxury, they had gradually advanced the time of dinner till half-past three was now the Gothic hour for this repast. On this evening the moon was high in the heavens, eking out the short twilight; the equinoctial winds seemed all asleep, for not a leaf stirred, and so delicious was the air, which even the iron frosts of January cannot render sufficiently cruel to injure the leaves of the soft myrtle, that they continued to sit, conversing calmly, but with all their hearts awakened, on many a theme of deep interest that, in circles more *blasés* with the pleasures of conversation, are passed over with a few well-turned periods, and dismissed.

The species of gratification to be derived from travelling was among these, and on this Alfred spoke with the enthusiasm that was natural to him; but with a greater mixture of melancholy than he had ever before permitted to appear on any subject which they had discussed together, confessing that the certainty of this pleasure never being his now and then went near to shake his philosophy.

"And why should it not be yours?" said Charles eagerly; "why should a man of two-and-twenty make up his mind never to see Rome, just because he knows himself to be particularly capable of enjoying it?"

"I should not have thought that you, Charles, could have been much at a loss to find reasons why I was never likely to reach Rome," replied Alfred.

"Because of the expense? That's nonsense," said Charles, with his usual impetuosity. "Your fellowship will be double what it is now, and more too, in a few years; and then, you know, you mean to take orders and have pupils; and I should like to know if, out of all that, you could not save enough to get, some how or other, to Italy."

"That I do hope for the blessing of obtaining the employments you name is most certain, Charles; but, if left to my own unassisted wisdom, I should never have discovered that this would lead to my having leisure to traverse Europe, that I might look at pictures and statues, and walk over the graves of great men."

"Leisure? Why, people almost always give holidays, you know, when they take pupils. And ask Norris about duty. Has he not been here for nearly three months? You are a vastly clever fellow, Alfred; but you do talk nonsense sometimes. Don't you think so, Isabella?"

It was some time since Isabella had spoken a word, and when now addressed she started as if roused from a reverie, and for all answer only repeated the word, "nonsense."

"Yes, my dear; if you have not been asleep, I think you must be aware that Mr. Alfred Reynolds has been talking nonsense."

"No," replied Isabella, shaking her head.

"No," repeated Charles, mimicking her. "You have been asleep, Isabella, I am quite sure of it from your manner of speaking."

"You are a vastly clever fellow, Charles, but you do talk nonsense sometimes," said Isabella, repeating his words.

"Lucid—evidently asleep, but lucid; and therefore precisely in the proper state for giving invaluable answers to whatever questions may be asked. Now, then, why does Alfred Reynolds declare that it is decreed by Heaven he never shall see Rome?"

"He named not Heaven's decrees," replied Isabella, speaking in a solemn oracular tone.

"So! I must mend my speech, or I shall mar my answer. Why does Alfred Reynolds declare that he never shall see Rome?"

"He declares only that he fears he may never see it; but, as he has declared also, that it is one of the things he should most wish to do, I so far agree with you, Mr. Charles, as to think it very possible he may see it, despite his misgivings," replied Isabella, in her usual manner.

"I meant more than that, Mrs. Wentworth, by my prophecy," said Alfred. "In truth, without any great presumption, I may say that I know I never shall see Rome. Three months,

even had I gold that might serve as wings, would suffice to do little more than torture me, for such an expedition as we are talking of."

"Then, scrape money together like a dragon for a few years," said Charles, "and then give up your pupils and your curacy for a year or two."

"Even if it were possible, I should not think it right," replied his friend. "A humble curate, Charles, has taken important duties upon himself: and I do not quite approve a wandering idle life for a clergyman, even though he be but a curate, and has a longing to see Rome for his excuse."

It was so evident that Alfred was in earnest, that Charles at last gave way, and contented himself with a muttered exclamation of—"It is a devilish pity, then, that you should ever be a clergyman!" suffered the subject to drop.

The party soon afterwards exchanged the dining for the drawing-room, which they were surprised to find already almost dark. During the interval that elapsed before lights arrived Isabella contrived to lead Mrs. Reynolds to a sofa, apart from the rest, who all hovered near the windows; and after affectionately expressing her sorrow for the separation that was so near, said, carelessly enough,—“And how long will it be before your son is ordained, Mrs. Reynolds?”

"About two months, I think. He has already had more than one title offered him; and no obstacle remains, except the having to move ourselves. This must be done, dearly as we love our little cottage here; so the sooner we set about it the better."

The lights arrived, and books, work, and chessmen were brought forward as usual; but Isabella pleaded fatigue as an excuse for retiring early, and the party broke up nearly two hours before the usual time.

During the first part of the *tête-à-tête* breakfast between the brother and sister on the following morning Isabella was unusually silent, till her brother said,—

"You are grave, *carissima*, this morning. Are you thinking that it is our last day upon the island?"

"No—yes—perhaps I was. But I was thinking of something else too, Charles. I was thinking of a very wise thing that you uttered last night. You look, very naturally, surprised; but I am quite in earnest."

"Not the least surprised, I do assure you,—only I should like to know which of my morsels of wisdom it was which so particularly attracted your attention?"

"What you said about Alfred Reynolds was so true," she

replied, quietly, but not without some slight increase of colour, "that it has recurred to me repeatedly since."

"And what might that be?" inquired her brother, looking perhaps a little more earnestly at her than she liked.

"I mean about his taking orders. I perfectly agree with him in what he said about wandering clergymen. But then, as he has no very immediate prospect of getting a living, I do think it is a pity that he should be ordained."

"I said so too, I know," replied Charles, looking grave. "But, between you and me, Isabella, I am afraid he must do it. For, in the first place, a curate's salary, small as it is, would make an important addition to their little income; and, moreover, he would never be likely to make anything of taking pupils, unless he were in orders."

"Then you did not mean what you said, Charles?"

"Oh! yes, I did. I said it was a pity such a fine fellow, so full of poetry, imagination, and all that, should have his wings lopped off,—and so it is; but it would be a greater pity still, you know, for his excellent mother to see him lose the object she has been so many years struggling to obtain for him: wouldn't it?"

"Certainly. Alfred would die, I believe, rather than disappoint her."

"I know he would," said Charles, "I am quite certain of it, and though I cannot bear to hear him talk in that sort of quiet resigned way of never doing or seeing anything he most wishes for, a moment's serious reflection is sufficient to show me that there is no help for it."

Isabella was again silent for several minutes, till she was once more roused by an abrupt question—

"And what are you thinking of now, Isabella?"

"I am still thinking of Mr. Reynolds," she replied, deliberately, and as if determined not to be afraid of saying what she wished; though her eyes were cast down, and there was a faltering in her voice that showed strong feeling of some sort or other, concerning the subject under discussion: "I am still thinking, Charles, that it is greatly to be lamented that such a man should, in some degree, as one might say, become the sacrifice to his own goodness. Not, Heaven knows, that I would wish him to change his admirable principles in any way; but if it were possible—if by any means, it might be possible to—to—to assist him, Charles—— You know how very rich I am, and how little I love that idle sort of parade that I believe often makes rich people poor; therefore I cannot help having a great deal of money at the banker's. Indeed, I know there is more

than three thousand pounds there, and I have thought two or three times that I must ask papa what I had best do with it. Now, I have been thinking, Charles, that if you could purchase an annuity for Mrs. Reynolds with two thousand pounds, and give the third to Alfred to travel with for a year or two, everything would be exactly as we wish it to be. Do you think that you could manage this?"

"There is one way, Isabella, in which I think it could all be managed with perfect facility, and with a degree of success greatly beyond any you as yet appear to anticipate," said Charles, fixing his searching eyes very keenly upon her, "and if you would adopt it, I swear that I should love you a thousand times better than I have ever yet done. Shall I tell you what my way would be?"

"It cannot be better than mine, I am quite sure," replied his sister, rolling up the tablecloth, and unrolling it again, with great perseverance, "so it would be only wasting time to talk about it. All I want you to tell me is, whether you think my scheme practicable."

Charles, who kept his eyes very steadily fixed upon her face, replied, "Mine would be better, Isabella."

"You will not answer me, I perceive," she replied, rising from the table, "so we will talk no more about it."

"Dearest Isabella! I will answer you. Folly indeed would it be should there be any want of confidence between you and me. Why should I hide from you my belief that you love my noble-hearted friend? why should I affect to disguise my belief that he loves you? or why, for another moment, refrain from telling you, that your marriage with him would gratify the dearest wish of my heart?"

"Marriage!" repeated Isabella, shuddering, "my marriage? — Charles, Charles, you cannot believe it possible!"

"And why not? He——" Then suddenly stopping short, with a look that seemed to show some painful thought had struck him, he remained silent for a moment, and then gravely added, "Do you mean, Isabella, that because of his poverty, Alfred Reynolds may not dare to raise his eyes to you?"

"Gracious Heaven, no!" exclaimed Isabella, vehemently; "the thought is unworthy of you, brother!"

"You are right, and I beg your pardon. But why should you answer me then with an air of so much displeasure? Surely, there was nothing in what I said to justify it."

"It was not displeasure, Charles," replied Isabella, bursting into tears; "oh, far! very far otherwise! Could you know all I think of Alfred Reynolds, how highly, how sincerely—in short, that is not a theme upon which we should differ. But

marriage, Charles! Think for a moment of all that is past, but think without talking about it to me. A thousand feelings prevent my even alluding to this terrible subject. Gratitude—pity—the remembrance of essential kindness, and essential goodness too, shown in this very spot, this very village here.”

Isabella stopped, overpowered by strong emotion.

“My dear, my most dear Isabella!” said Charles, tenderly taking her hand, “I cannot bear to see these tears, and think that I have opened the source of them. Yet, let me understand you, my dear love. Do you mean that your feelings for Mr. Wentworth have been, or still are, such as for ever to prevent you forming any future marriage?”

“Not that—no, I did not say so,” said Isabella, colouring violently. “I meant to tell you, Charles, though I so hate myself if I do but think upon it in silence and in solitude, that to speak of it, cannot be considered by me otherwise than as a crime; but yet, on this occasion, I meant to make you understand me fully. I meant that you should know, that no word, no thought has such terror for my heart as that of marriage.”

The last words were uttered in so low a whisper, that had not her auditor been prepared for them, they could hardly have been caught; but having spoken thus, she threw her arms upon the table, and hid her face upon them, as if to show that she could say no more.

“Isabella!” said her brother, in agitation almost equal to her own, “this is indeed a theme that we must not speak upon. I reverence your forbearance, your scruples. I have ever done so: but I, too, have suffered, and that without any mixture of the feelings which have restrained your complaints, and dammed up, as it were, your confidence from your fondest friends; but my lips have been as firmly closed upon the subject in your presence as yours to me, and I trust never again to allude to it. But before I now cease speaking, let me conjure you not to delude your own heart by a confusion of ideas generated by a word. Marriage, Isabella, need not always mean misery.”

“It may be so. I believe—I trust you are right. See Margaret—see my mother. I am sure you are quite right, and I do not think it is any doubt about my own happiness that makes me shrink with such sickening terror from the thought. But indeed, Charles, I am not myself in temper what I was formerly; and think—think but for a moment of the possibility that I, in my turn, might make a fellow-creature miserable! We, none of us, know ourselves, Charles. Poor Wentworth meant to act rightly, nay, more, he thought he did so. Is not this a lesson for me? No, no, ask me not, name it not; I cannot—cannot marry—even Alfred!”

It was strange, that at the very moment her words thus seemed to express almost everything Charles wished for his friend, the conviction came upon him of there being no hope whatever that she would change the determination she had expressed.

"I will not torment you, Isabella," he replied; "I will name the subject no more. I have long wished to tell you what my wishes were, and to hint—having no right to do more—to hint to you, that were you as penniless as himself, poor Reynolds would not so carefully avoid letting you see how fondly he loves you. But no more of this. I have pledged my word to you, and will keep it."

Charles here heaved a deep sigh, as if to throw off and relieve himself from what had given him almost intolerable pain. After the interval of a few moments, he resumed the conversation again in a tone comparatively indifferent.

"Now, then, Isabella," he said, "to return to what you were so kindly saying, and I so unwisely interrupted; you really wish, then, that a sum arising from your superfluity, amounting, I think you say, to three thousand pounds, should be devoted to Mrs. Reynolds and her son. I should like this too—like to believe it possible; and so indeed it may, if I have deceived myself as egregiously about his feelings as I have done about those of another, which is very likely, perhaps. I know Reynolds well, and though he is precisely the most high-minded, noble, and independent being I have ever chanced to meet, I doubt if any feelings of his own, short of those to which I have alluded, would be held by him as a justifiable cause for refusing what would make his mother easy for life. I doubt, however, the probability of his consenting to set out upon a travelling expedition, for his own pleasure, at your expense. However, that is no business of mine; I will do my errand; and, as I have said, if he be in the happy state of indifference we both wish for him, it is possible he may accept that part of your charity which is offered to his mother."

"Charity!" exclaimed Isabella, with clasped hands and burning cheeks, "O Charles! why should you use so hateful a word?"

"Hateful? No, surely; and how can I substitute any other? It is charity, Isabella, and very noble and meritorious charity, certainly. As to that portion of it, indeed, which you offer to himself, I rather fear, I confess, that it will give him more pain than pleasure. However, as I said before, I will do my errand; so good morning for the present, dear Isabella."

"Stay, stay!" she exclaimed, seizing his arm: "go not for

the world! I see it all now, and I know not how for a single moment I could have so beguiled myself. No, not for the whole world would I have so insulting a proposal reach him. Alas! Charles, I am still a child in all such matters. But you know not how much I would give—nonsense, *give*, that's nothing—you know not how much I would suffer, to do her, or him either, Charles, some service."

Perhaps the smile with which this was received approached a little, a very little, towards a sneer, as he replied, "You are very kind—or at any rate I am quite sure you mean to be so."

"You are determined, I see, to make me hate myself," said Isabella, bitterly, "and your success promises to be perfect."

"I would rather make Alfred hate you," replied Charles.

"You might be equally successful, perhaps, there; but I really see no particular necessity for your taking any trouble about it. What symptom, pray, has he shown, that such obliging interference on your part is necessary?"

"Isabella!" said Charles, gravely, "do you mean to assert that you are ignorant of Alfred's devoted love for you?"

"Has he ever confided any such feeling to you, Charles?" she said, with varying colour and a voice that faltered very perceptibly.

"No, certainly, he never has."

"Then why will you persist in fancying it?" she replied. "You cannot believe, I know you cannot, that he has ever given me reason to think so; for if he had, should I, Charles, have given you the commission I spoke of? Can you believe I would?"

"No. But you must be strangely, lamentably blind."

"Pardon me there; I am not blind. I have hardly spoken to my own heart so plainly as I am now speaking to you; but many feelings force me to throw off all reserve with you. I believe that Alfred likes, admires me, if you will; but that he loves me, I believe it not. Never for a single moment has he been betrayed into showing the slightest indication of any such feeling. He has uniformly had the appearance of being pleased, happy, animated, gay; but not in love. Trust me I am not blind, though it is probable I may be somewhat vain; for—laugh at me if you will—this contrast between the pleasure he has evidently felt in my society, and the self-possession which has prevented his ever permitting me for a moment to suspect that he was anything more than amused, set my self-love at work to explain it; and I am come to the conviction that, had I been differently situated, he might have loved me; but that, knowing my story, as I have no doubt he does, from you, Charles—knowing my story, I have



no doubt, I say, that he thinks as I do, that I neither can nor ought to marry again."

"It has never struck you, then, that this admirable command over himself may have arisen from the circumstance of your being so greatly his superior in wealth?" said her brother.

"No, indeed; I cannot believe that so sordid an idea ever entered his head."

"So sordid an idea, you call it?" "What sort of idea would it have been, Isabella, had he, without a shilling in the world—for by marrying, you know, he would forfeit his fellowship—if, without a shilling in the world, he had conceived the notion of proposing himself to a woman with an improving estate of above five thousand a year at her own disposal? How would you have classed such an idea?"

"There is no use in talking about it," she replied, almost peevishly. "No man, who really loved a woman, could be prevented from letting her know it by such a paltry motive as that. But there is something great and noble in abstaining from such a confession, because there are moral reasons for its being improper for her to listen to it."

"I should be sorry to say anything, Isabella, to lower my friend in your estimation; but truth obliges me to assure you, that imagination never created a more baseless fabric than you have constructed, when supposing that Alfred Reynolds could be such an egregious fool, as to fancy there was any moral objection to your marrying again. No; dearly as I love him, and happy as a union between you would make me, it is but fair that you should see him as he is. Of the sublimity you attribute to him, he is quite incapable; but to the sordid feeling you so vehemently despise, I think it not unlikely he may die a victim."

"Die a victim? I do not understand you."

"It is no matter, Isabella. You have expressed yourself too strongly to leave me any hope that what I most wish can ever come to pass. So, farewell for an hour or two. My head aches; and if you will lend me your groom's mare for that time, I will take a gallop to cure it."

## CHAPTER XLII.

THE man who at length, unsummoned, came to remove the breakfast, found his mistress sitting with her hands clasped together, and her eyes fixed on the carpet, the very picture or personification of a deep reverie. She started at his entrance; and seizing the bonnet and shawl which she had that morning used for her last early walk, she made her escape through a door that led across the garden to the cliff.

Margaret had declared the evening before, that she should be too busy to walk; and before this startling conversation with Charles, Isabella's intention was to have walked with him to make a last visit to Mrs. Reynolds. But this was now quite out of the question; indeed, she dreaded nothing more than seeing her, or any one else. The idea that Margaret might change her mind, or that Norris might call upon her, hastened her steps, and made her rather fly than walk to the point where a rough and rugged path abruptly descended the cliff, and led her to a cluster of rocks upon the beach, amidst the masses of which she was not likely to be descried. The autumnal wind had risen during the night, and blew heavily; though the bright sun still shone without a cloud, beguiling the unwary into a belief that it was a very fine day. Isabella, therefore, seated herself upon a rock, on a spot that seemed secure from all eyes, and perfectly unconscious that she was becoming colder and colder every moment, sat meditating on the seeming waywardness of her destiny, till her lips became quite blue, and her cheeks quite white.

Without having any very fixed purpose as to what he should say to him, Charles directed his horse's head towards the cottage of his friend; but Alfred, restless and miserable, had long been rambling on the beach, nobody knew in what direction; and the hope of meeting him before the hour of dinner was abandoned. Meanwhile, poor Reynolds wandered on, with one solitary idea to console him, amidst a world of as desolate and miserable feelings as ever fixed their ruthless fangs upon a sensitive heart. He had lived beside Isabella for nearly three months; he had enjoyed an intercourse with her of the most unbounded intellectual freedom, exchanging thoughts, opinions, feelings, on every subject under heaven, excepting on that only which never for an instant was forgotten, but which he would have deemed it the very lowest baseness to disclose.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed aloud, as the buffeting wind blew in his face, and made his words inaudible almost to his own ears—"thank God! I have escaped the danger which so often threatened me; I have looked in her eyes and seen softness there, but turned away from it, and spoken calmly of rocks and trees. I have drunk deep, deep of the delight of loving, and of believing it possible I might be loved, and have not paid my integrity for it. As for my peace of mind! Dearest mother, she talks of peace of mind as if it were a feeling I was enjoying, but might lose! Now she thinks me safe, perfectly safe. And so I am. There was only one thing that I should have deemed too high a price for what I have enjoyed, and I thank God I have not paid it."

Thus he went muttering on, his heart sometimes swelling till his eyes filled with tears, yet still calling upon his spirits to rejoice that the walk of yesterday, the last in which there was any chance of their being *tête-à-tête*, was over, and his presumptuous secret still his own.

It was in this mood, and with an aspect as little fitting as possible to be presented before the eyes of a lady from whom it was absolutely necessary to conceal every appearance of strong emotion, that Alfred, turning the sharp corner of a rock, found himself precisely face to face with Isabella.

It would not be easy to say which of the two started most violently; but as to any question that might be put by the curious, as to which was, at that moment, the most intently absorbed by thinking of the other, there would be no difficulty at all in answering it, inasmuch as neither the one nor the other had the very least imaginable space of mind left that was not occupied by the image, moral and physical, of the person who now suddenly met their gaze.

An effort, and a strong one, was necessary on both sides to render them what each would consider fitting company for the other, and upon all such occasions it is the woman who generally makes the effort first. Whether it be that the necessity of self-control be stronger, or that the power given to exert it be naturally greater, it can hardly be denied that a woman more rarely fails in such a trial than a man.

"It is a blustering day, Mr. Reynolds," said Isabella, drawing down her bonnet, and securing it more tightly under her chin, as much, probably, to conceal the condition of her tearful eyes, as to guard against the increasing blast.

"It is, indeed!" he replied; "too blustering, Mrs. Wentworth, for you to remain thus exposed to it. Will you accept my arm to ascend the cliff?"

"Not yet," said Isabella; "I rather like it."

"But shall you not take cold?"

"Oh! no. The sea air never does that. I think we shall have a real storm. Do you perceive the clouds that are rolling up towards us? The brightness of the morning is gone already."

"Yes, the brightness is quite over!" replied Reynolds, looking with rather a vacant eye upon the sea that was rolling and springing before them, while even the white crests of the waves seemed to look dark in the increasing gloom.

"I know not why," said Isabella, settling herself with her back against a rock, as if quite determined to remain where she was, "but I like this better than when everything is calm and tranquil. Is not the dark shade that monstrous mass of clouds throws over the sea terrific and sublime?"

"Yes, yes, no doubt of it. But, indeed, you must not stay here. I know this coast, and am quite sure a storm is coming on that may make it difficult for you to keep your footing as you ascend the cliff. Come, Mrs. Wentworth, pray come directly."

"No," said Isabella, quietly; "I shall remain and watch it. But I will not insist," she added, with a smile, "upon your remaining too. If you do not enjoy it, you had better go."

What other answer could the young man give than to seat himself beside her?

"Look at their heavy flapping wings," said Isabella, pointing to several gulls that, cowering low over the waves, appeared to be approaching the shore for shelter; "and that ominous screeching cry! Is it not fine?"

"And that shooting lightning that begins to pierce the clouds. That is fine too," said Alfred; "but, for God's sake, let me take you to a place of safety!"

"Do you think you could make a drawing of this scene, as it looks now?" said Isabella, paying no attention to his remonstrance. "You might have a rude figure or two among the rocks there, fishermen perhaps drawing up a boat to save it from the violence of the sea. I think you could do it, Mr. Reynolds."

"I might draw the scene from memory, without much difficulty," replied Alfred, rising from his seat, and standing before her, so as in some degree to shelter her, "but I would not place fishermen there; I do assure you it would be unnatural. No fisherman in the world would be so foolish as wantonly to remain upon the beach at such a moment as this."

"You are trying to frighten me. But what is there to fear? A wetting, in case rain should follow the thunder? You have seen me brave that more than once already. Do let me enjoy

it, Mr. Reynolds. You know there can be no real danger, for I am not twenty minutes' walk from my own door."

"The rain!—can you imagine I speak to you so very much in earnest on account of any danger the rain can bring with it?"

"Hush!" said Isabella. "What a 'lengthened, aggravated roar' that was! Is it possible that you do not take pleasure in all this majestic uproar?"

"I do not think you are safe, Mrs. Wentworth," were the words he spoke in reply, but they were not heard by her; for, after sucking in, as it were, its breath for one moment of most awful stillness, the storm burst forth anew in such a tremendous tempest of wind and hail, that Isabella's courage seemed threatening to forsake her; and having sat with her head sunk upon her breast for a minute or two, subdued and silent, she rose up, and laying her hand upon Alfred's arm, said, "You are right, Mr. Reynolds, we had better go."

To go now, however, was no easy matter. The hail, indeed, no longer battered them, but such a cataract of rain dashed down upon their shrinking heads instead, that it seemed an effort of strength to stand upright under it. The wind, too, roared with even augmented fury, and the instant they stepped out from the shelter afforded by the masses of rock amidst which they had been seated, Isabella found it very nearly impossible to stand.

Reynolds threw his arm round her, and so placed himself while he almost carried her forward, as to afford all the protection that his person could give; but the rain and wind together nearly took away her breath, and pointing backward to the spot they had left, she looked up into the face of her companion as if to ask for counsel, for to attempt speaking would have been utterly useless.

Before replying to this appeal, Reynolds looked round in all directions upon the frowning heavens, to ascertain what prospect there might be of a termination to their sudden fit of rage; but not a speck of smiling light appeared. The roar of the tide, which was rushing furiously in, seemed to bully the wind that battled with it; the thunder, approaching nearer and nearer every moment, crashed and rattled in their very ears, while ever and anon flashes of lightning shot so sharply across their eyes, that perforce they winked, and then hardly dared to raise their eyelids again. It took not long to decide, in the midst of this fearful tumult, that almost any risk was better than remaining to endure it; and, uttering unheard the words, "Forgive me!" he seized her in his arms and bore her safely, but not without considerable difficulty, to the foot of the rude steps by which

she had descended. To attempt mounting them with her in his arms was out of the question; but by placing her before him, and securing her shawl so tightly round her as to prevent it catching the blast, he enabled her to ascend about one-third of the way in tolerable safety. But here a new difficulty arose; the steps, which were but very imperfectly cut, here ceased; the *uncivil* engineer who had constructed the ascent having taken advantage of a level space of about four feet wide, which, turning round a sharp angle, led the climber to a part of the cliff which it was just possible to crawl up without any further assistance of his. But on turning this angle, Alfred Reynolds was met by such a blast, that he was fain to cling to a projecting fragment of the cliff to prevent his being hurled from his perilous station into the sea that now roared over the breakers exactly under him.

Sick, and almost giddy with terror at the idea of Isabella's encountering the same danger, he turned round and made a sign to her that she must descend again, which, docile enough, poor soul! now that it was nearly too late for such docility to get either herself or her companion out of the scrape into which her rashness had drawn them, she obeyed; and, notwithstanding the buffeting that met her in the shape both of wind and spray, she got safely to the bottom.

But here the dangers that threatened them were infinitely greater than before they made their unsuccessful attempt to scale the cliff; for the sea, flowing in several feet above its ordinary level, would soon, it was too evident, not leave them an inch of beach to stand upon.

Alfred placed his pale and repentant companion on the widest and safest of the chalk steps she had come down; but they were only formed to hold one foot at a time, and afforded a resting-place so very insecure, exposed as they were to the wild gusts that swept around them, that Alfred became terrified lest, in spite of the best shelter his placing himself some steps below could afford, she might lose her footing and fall. But he did not "harp the fear aright;" Isabella's little feet had a much better chance of keeping their station than his own, and the more so, of course, from his attention being wholly engrossed by endeavouring so to place himself as to protect her, wherefore, within a few minutes of their taking possession of their tottering resting-place, he lost his balance, the slippery state of the soil prevented his recovering himself, and he fell prone into the boiling surf below.

The scream of Isabella made itself heard, despite the elemental din; and, without a moment's reflection, she began rapidly to descend. The peril of Alfred was, however, greatly

less than it appeared; for the water, though deep enough to break his fall, threatened no chance of drowning to a man strong enough to struggle with the noisy but shallow wave; and in a moment he had made his way to a rock at no great distance from the spot where Isabella stood, her descent suddenly suspended by the eagerness with which she watched his motions. Reynolds was neither stunned nor in any other way injured by his fall, excepting that he had lost his hat, and that his brown curls, as well as every thread in his garments, were dripping with salt water. Having quickly reached the vantage-ground which the summit of the mass he had got upon commanded, he looked round, with no very hopeful glance, it must be confessed, to determine what was best to be done during the next miserable half-hour. He perceived that the tide was already turning, and thought that within that time he should be able, if Isabella would again permit herself to be carried, to convey her round the base of the cliff to a path about a quarter of a mile distant that was greatly more practicable than the treacherous steps. But the interval! the terrible interval! how was she to bear it? To stand thus gazing at her from a distance, when the next blast might serve her as the last had served him, was intolerable; and with no better hope than to wade through the surf and again place himself before her, he sprang off, to Isabella's inexpressible terror; and by means first of one stone and then of another, very skilfully reached, contrived to attain the highest part of the beach at a short distance from her, without being again much more than knee-deep in the water.

While making his way from this point to that where the trembling Isabella stood, he perceived a small opening in the cliff, too insignificant to be called a cavern; but which, being at the elevation of about three feet from the highest point to which the water had reached, was still dry. To ascertain whether it was deep enough to afford shelter to the precious object of his care, he scrambled into it, and, to his surprise and infinite delight, found its dimensions amply sufficient for the purpose. Then waiting for an instant to press the dripping brine from his hair—for what with that and the drifting rain, that still continued to fall in torrents, he could hardly see—he scrambled out again, and the next moment once again stood close beside the greatly comforted Isabella.

With outspread arms, to insure the safety of her descent, he made her understand, partly by words that victoriously struggled with the blast, and partly by signs, that she was to come down to him. She instantly obeyed, and unresistingly suffered him to convey her in his arms to the shelter he had found. She had still sufficient energy left to achieve the entrance to it with

no great difficulty, but he attempted not to follow her, though half a dozen persons might have found place there.

It would have been easy, could her voice have been heard amidst the still howling storm, to have insisted on his placing himself beside her in terms which he could hardly have resisted, and yet such as she would have felt no repugnance to utter; but he stood beyond reach of the hand she would willingly have stretched out to express what it was in vain to speak, and having for a minute or two suffered the extreme of vexation from this inability to combat his very unnecessary and ill-timed etiquette, she had recourse to a stratagem, feminine enough in its conception, and perfectly effectual in obtaining its object.

Perceiving that his eyes, though for the most part turned towards the raging sea, were nevertheless from time to time directed upon herself, she watched for the proper moment, and when he again turned towards her, was in the act, or seemed to be so, of making a very dangerous descent.

To leave his own position, spring into the cave, and stand beside her was the work of an instant; so rapidly, indeed, had it been performed, that the startled Isabella totally lost her presence of mind, and almost throwing herself upon the arm which even in the act of springing he had extended to stop her, she burst into tears, and murmured, but in accents that their shelter permitted to be audible, "Alfred!"

For one moment, for one short moment, and no more, the young man's arm closed round her, and she felt herself pressed to his heart; but in the next he was as far from her as the narrow limits of their station would allow, and his countenance expressed a degree of anguish so hopeless and profound, that one glance at it decided the destiny of Isabella for life.

Let no one ever profess, or ever secretly plume themselves upon any strong determination of never doing this, that, or the other; for fate often seems to delight in taking vengeance for such presumption, and to force the self-confident boaster into doing precisely that, against which his protestations had been the most vehement. When her aunt Christina, in days of yore, caused the indignant blood to visit the cheeks of her young nieces, by declaring that one of the reforms most wanted was in the manner of choosing partners for life, and that things would never be as they ought to be till woman enjoyed the same privilege of selection as man, whose voice was it that was raised to answer her? whose eloquence proved so satisfactorily to all who listened that the proposal was equally distasteful and absurd? It was Isabella's. And never were words spoken with deeper sincerity. Yet listen to her now, and then say how much human opinions are worth.



"Alfred!" she said again, with clasped hands and streaming eyes—"Alfred! If you love me for pity, tell me so!"

If any one thinks that Alfred Reynolds had not already sufficiently outraged every feeling of his heart, in order to prove to himself, and to all others whom it might concern, that he would rather die than acknowledge his love for a woman of five thousand a year—if any chance to be of that opinion, what followed will forfeit him their approbation for ever; for, perfectly incapable of restraining for a moment longer the feeling that had influenced every act and tinctured every thought for years, he drew near to the idol of his heart, and in one burst of uncontrollable emotion, poured out the history of his love.

And what became of the storm without? Did it rage on? Did the lightning flash, and the thunder roll? Did the winds still howl, and clouds still pour their torrents down? It was a full hour before Alfred and Isabella knew anything about it, and then they were only a little awakened to the consciousness of where they were, and the original cause of their being there, by Isabella's desecrating a line of yellow light in the horizon, which seemed suddenly to promise the return of sunshine to the world.

"Alfred! Look there!" she exclaimed; "does not that say that the storm, the darkness, the misery, are past? Shall we not hail it?"

"Hail it, Isabella! Do you ask me if I shall hail the consequences of this storm? Oh! is it not all a dream? How have I spoken what your ears have heard? Will you, can you, ever know all I have suffered? No, dearest, no! You may guess my happiness, but never, never can you know what I have suffered."

"And so you would have gone on, I suppose, to the end, had I not piously prayed the gods to 'unsex me here.' Shall I ever forgive you, Alfred, for putting me in such a strait?"

"But may not there be some who will never forgive me for taking you out of it? Charles, dear, generous Charles will, I believe in my soul, rejoice with me—and Norris, and your sweet sister—some how or other, I do not fear them; but despite my happiness, Isabella, my heart sinks when I anticipate the judgment which your older friends must pass upon such a connection for you."

"On that point, listen to me, Alfred, once for all," she replied. "You have already proved yourself very lamentably ignorant, my dear friend, of the nature of my heart, of their hearts, and, as I do truly hope and believe, of human hearts in general. You have done all you could to crush all the best feelings that Heaven has given to help us through this vale of tears, and all for the sake of giving importance to the very least important

feature in the lot of mortals. All this is very bad, and I believe, if I spoke with perfect sincerity, I should say that I thought you had been very wicked. But don't look so miserable: I will forgive you, though you very nearly succeeded in your magnanimous attempt to make me miserable for life, upon condition, that never, by word, deed, or look, you give me reason to suspect for the future, that, instead of thinking about me, you are calculating the comparative value of hard, cold, stiffnecked pride which you call independence, and of warm, unselfish, and devoted affection which I call the only boon worth having, that one human being can bestow upon another."

"Lovely sophist!" said Alfred, with a sigh, "I will bring my mind as nearly as I can to receive all your axioms for truth."

"Am I to consider myself engaged to you as your future wife?" said Isabella, almost solemnly.

"Had such a question suggested itself to me when the light broke upon my feverish dreams this morning," replied Alfred, "I should have driven it from me as something that savoured of madness, or of thoughts that might lead to it; but now, Isabella, if any, save yourself, with that dear world of promise in your eyes, should put it doubtfully, I should run a fearful risk of being mad the other way."

"Well then, I *am* your affianced wife," she said, "and as such, Alfred, I will put it to your heart, whether any future allusions to our common fortune, so uttered as to make me feel that my having brought it, makes it hateful to you, can be likely to increase my happiness?"

Reynolds gazed at her as she spoke, and read on her ingenuous brow the deep sincerity of every word she uttered.

"Never, sweet love! will I so offend you more," he replied, in a voice that trembled with emotion. "O Isabella! am I not too happy? What a heart, what a soul is that which has thus bound itself to mine!"

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While all this went on, the yellow light grew stronger, till at length, something like struggling sunshine found its way into their strange retreat, and falling on Alfred's figure, made Isabella start, while its appearance recalled the accident which had plunged him over head and ears in sea-water.

"If I do not behave better on future occasions than I have done to-day, Alfred, you will lead but a sorry life with me. What a state you are in!" she added, laying her hand upon his arm—"and I sitting here and forgetting it! Look at the tide! It has left us rather more beach than is absolutely necessary to insure our getting home. So now, give me your arm, dear friend, and let us see whether being very happy will enable us

to get as skilfully out of this dear hole, as being very miserable enabled us to get into it."

The business was achieved without much difficulty; and though the happy lovers made their appearance at the cottage door, in so very forlorn-looking a condition as to call forth an exclamation of alarm from the servant who opened it, no bad consequences whatever ensued from that morning's adventures; but, on the contrary, the sketch produced by Alfred of the storm was never looked at afterwards without such feelings of grateful happiness as proved that a cloudless sky is not the only aspect which the heavens can wear productive of pleasure to man.

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## CHAPTER XLIII.

LITTLE now remains to be told of the fortunes of Isabella. It seemed that she had received the proportion of chastening sorrow, deemed necessary for her by Heaven; for, from the hour that she extracted from the noble-hearted Alfred the confession of his love, her fate had fewer of the capricious variations of fortune in it than often happens amongst us. No one was ever told how very wretched had been the few dark years of her first marriage; but all who approached her seemed to share in the happiness of that which followed it.

Her mother, who of all her family alone knew that she might, had she so willed, have been a viscountess, never alluded to that wonderfully well-kept secret but once, and then it was to whisper in her ear some half-dozen years afterwards, when Isabella's children and those of Margaret were blended together in one happy group on the pretty lawn at Abbot's Preston, "How very, very glad I am, Isabella, that you did not marry Lord Morrison! He is a very good sort of man, I believe; but we never *could* have been so happy altogether, as we are now, with any other man in the world except Alfred."

Had Isabella never known the torture of being united to a bad temper, it is probable that she would never have enjoyed so thoroughly as she did the blessings conferred by the companionship of a good one. The first two years after her marriage with Alfred were passed on the Continent; and the delight of watching the happiness of such a spirit as his, amidst scenes which brought all his fine faculties into action, and which he had so utterly despaired of ever seeing, was great, indeed. And was it possible that she could fail to remember, notwithstanding her more than willingness to forget it, the weeks she had passed at

Paris? The eagerness, the happy energy of spirit with which Alfred sought for her every object that could awaken her taste, or delight her fancy. The joy with which his fond eyes reflected every sensation of pleasure expressed by hers, the perfect sympathy that bound their hearts and minds together on every subject, delicious as it all was, would not, could not have been so keenly enjoyed without the contrast.

Charles was their companion in this delightful expedition; and it may be doubted if he did not enjoy it almost as much as either of them. He knew that their happiness was in a great degree his work, and they delighted to prove to him, in every possible way, that they knew it too. Never, certainly, was there a happier trio; for if Charles entered with less enthusiasm than his companions into the study of art, he atoned for it by the zeal with which he acted as their truffle dog in seeking out whatever was best worth seeing in nature: and few people ever saw Italy as they did. The hours devoted to painting and sculpture, indeed, if more keenly enjoyed than is quite usual, were passed much in the same routine that others followed who were engaged in the same pursuit; but their rides and walks were arranged on a plan entirely their own. Instead of contenting themselves with the "*points de vue superbes*" immortalized in the guide-books, their custom was to turn aside as soon as these had been enjoyed, to ransack the hills and dales, the ins and outs of all the various mountain regions through which they passed; and though Isabella had once more become a mother before her return to England, there were but few of these wanderings in which she was not included.

It would be needless to dwell at length on the family union that followed their return to Oak Park. Uncle David discovered, before they had been there a month—to Isabella's inexpressible delight—that no air agreed with him so well; and the chamber she had assigned him, looking out upon the flower garden, which Mr. Worthington had brought to perfection during their absence, often detained him for a week together from his old quarters at Abbot's Preston. Mrs. Worthington was the busiest and the happiest grandmother in the county; Miss Christina, though she fortunately discovered that for deep thinking and laborious composition no place suited her so well as her own snug window, was permitted to borrow as many books as she liked; and Aunt Lucy revelled in the delight of working stools for all the dear little children to sit upon.

The happy Alfred was not a man to be overlooked in any neighbourhood, and was soon acknowledged to be the most delightful acquisition to that around Oak Park; so that the marriage of Isabella seemed to have given more universal satisfaction

than usually attends the giving away of a fair hand and large fortune, it being a very general custom on all such occasions to discover that, "to be sure, one would have thought she might have done better."

To this *nem. con.* approbation, however, there was one rather violent exception. The indignation of Mrs. Wentworth was unbounded; and, if the happiness of Isabella and her husband could have been affected by invectives breathed against them from a distance throughout every day of the year, they certainly must have been as miserable, as they were exactly the reverse.

If, however, there was one amidst the happy party, of which Isabella and Alfred seemed the centre, more pre-eminently overflowing with contentment than the rest, it certainly was the gentle mother of Alfred. Her joys, like those of her beloved daughter-in-law, were sweetened by the power of contrast, producing a sort of sympathy between them, of which neither was insensible. Her home, as nobody who knew her history could doubt that it ought to be, was in the house and the heart of her devoted son; nor was there one of Isabella's family who did not feel that there, and there only, was her proper resting-place, after the painful, but well-rewarded, struggle through which she had passed.

And now, let me dismiss this most unromantic tale, by committing it to those for whose especial use it has been written.

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